The Sisters of S. John the Divine

S. John's Convent

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PROFESSOR B. M. CORRIGAN
STROLLING PLAYERS

A HARMONY OF CONTRASTS

BY

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

AND

CHRISTABEL R. COLERIDGE

'It takes all sorts to make a world.'

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CHAPTER I

TOUT EST PERDU FORS L'HONNEUR

'IT is all up with us, Selva.'

So spoke Sir Lewis Willingham, a tall, well set up soldierly man of some thirty years, with fair hair and moustaches, and a complexion only beginning to get its girlish red and white over-much blended together.

A pretty little plump creature, with eyes of the deepest blue, long black lashes, and the blackest of hair, setting off lovely rosy tints that embellished childish and roguishly sweet features, sprang up, and jumped into his arms.

'Never mind, Lewis darling! My experience is that one has just as much fun—ruined as not! I'd rather be a jolly old abbey, all over yellow lichen, and wallflower, and gold stems of stonecrop, than a horrid, brand new, red-brick house like Mr. Radford's!'

'You an abbey, Sally! You prepared that speech, didn't you? You've got the botany so pat!'

'You thought I could not be so poetical without preparation. But what does it mean, Lewis?'

'It means that we shall just scrape through honourably and owe no man anything if we throw all our substance into the gulf—sell this house and work for our living—somehow or other. I'm sorry for the
brat, but he will grow up used to it, and more sorry for Rupert and his education.'

'And what can we do, Lewis? Shall I go out charing?' she said, with a laugh, 'or lecture on boycotting——'

'Ay! what can we do? That is the question, hampered as we are with this handle to our name.'

They looked round at the pleasant room, the pleasanter perhaps for not being too tidy, a villa drawing-room, with windows opening to the ground, under a verandah where the early roses were beginning to veil a vista of purple hills.

It was three years since Sir Lewis Willingham had brought home his bride thither. His father was an old general, on whom a baronetcy had descended untowardly, while the estates went to an unsympathetic female heir, and who had invested his means in a bank connected with a shipping agency in the town of Ousehaven.

Lewis had been in the army, and had been one of the defenders of a proscribed and boycotted Irish family reduced to destitution. Inevitably, he fell passionately in love with the still more penniless niece, married her with the smallest possible permission, and to gratify the family notions of prudence, retired from the army, and came home to work in the office, and live with his father, and young sister and brother, Agnes and Rupert, whose portions were also invested in the bank, in a house on the outskirts of the town.

There, half a year before our story opens, the general had died; and the examination of affairs that followed had been anything but satisfactory. There had been unfortunate speculation, but this was not wholly to blame, for a larger port on the same coast
had lately attracted the trade, and the improvements in the Ousehaven Harbour had been a heavy expense, guaranteed by the house of Radford and Buckley, but failing of success. After many forebodings, gathering gradually into certainties, this was the upshot, and Sir Lewis Willingham, though his name did not appear, was one of the chief shareholders as heir and executor to his father, and as himself a director of the local bank.

Bankruptcy was barely avoided by the sacrifice; and Mr. Buckley meant to hold on and retrieve what he could, while Mr. Radford, an elderly man, and broken-hearted, could only retire with his wife to live on her own small means; and there was little employment for Mr. Buckley, his son George, who had been acting-clerk, or for Sir Lewis. The stroke had been impending for many weeks past, and this was the crisis foreseen, and met with this tone of defiance of fortune.

'By the bye,' exclaimed Selva at last, 'ruined or not, this note must be answered. It is from Mrs. Armytage. Ernley Armytage brought it, and is crazy to get us all to do "The Rivals," or something, for them at the village entertainment in the Park on the 30th. They say they will give the proceeds to any charity we like. I was thinking at the time whether we might not need charity as much as any one else.'

Lewis burst into an explosion of laughter. 'You've hit it, Sally,' he cried. 'Let us turn strolling players in good earnest. "'Tis my vocation, Hal!"'

'Well!' said Selva, looking up, 'there really is nothing you can do quite so well! And, oh!'—clapping her hands—'shall we have a dear, delightful van?'

'Painted canary colour,' added Lewis. 'Fancy
Agnes looking out of it! You would do it famously, with your cloak over your head, and the boy on your back!’ and as he spoke, he tied a silk handkerchief over her head, making her bright face look charmingly pretty. ‘There! you shall act gipsy queen, and make our fortunes!’

‘Seriously, Lewis, shall we have to live on our wits in the yellow van?’

‘Not quite; the paternal tin goes, as father was a shareholder; but you know my grandfather Dorset left his property in the hands of trustees for his daughters, and my mother’s share is still in their hands; so each of us, Agnes, Rupert, and myself, will still have a hundred and twenty pounds a year, so we shall not quite starve.’

‘And the aunts are as well off as ever?’

‘Oh yes; and as part of my mother’s share was paid down, and the houses are grown more valuable, they have five hundred pounds a year a piece.’

‘I’m glad of that. I wish any of my people in Ireland had as good a look out. But what am I to say to Mrs. Armytage?’

‘Say? Oh, here comes Aunt Anne!’ as there appeared in the garden a lively-looking lady with bright cheeks and eyes, and hair too gray for her forty-two years, giving the effect of powder, under her shady hat.

‘My dear Lewis!’ she exclaimed, seeing their bright faces, and Selva’s becoming head-gear, ‘then it is not as bad as we thought?’

‘Oh yes, it is! Only my lady is rehearsing the acting Colleen Bawn in a yellow van!’

‘Really and truly, it has come to this?’

‘Really and truly. Ruined horse and foot! But
it is not our own fault, we don't hurt any one else, so we can stand it very well without pulling a doleful face,

'But shall we go mourn for that, my dear,
The pale moon shines by night,'

he finished by singing.

'You ridiculous boy. Your Aunt Marian would say you treated it with unbecoming levity!' said Miss Anne Dorset. 'However, you have your mother's money, and us to look to, so it might be worse! There will always be a home for you with us.'

'You're always a brick, Aunt Nance;' said Lewis. Indeed, Anne had been always more like an elder sister to him than an aunt.

'But the note,' entreated Selva. 'They are to call for the answer at six! To be or not to be?'

'Theatrical already!' exclaimed Lewis. 'Has Ernley Armytage come to you, my dear Mrs. Malaprop?'

'Exactly so,' was the answer; 'and I set off to come to you to ask what you thought about it; only I met Mr. Buckley on the way with a face of woe.'

'There's no reason on earth why we should not accept,' said Lewis. 'Why should we go on as if one of us was going to be hanged? Fire away, Sally, and tell her we shall be happy! We'll have Agnes at home from Coalham by that time to look solemn through Lydia Languish, and I'll look up the rest of the lot.'

'That's right, Lewis!' exclaimed his aunt; 'keep up a stout, light heart to bear you through,'

'And do you know, Aunt Anne,' said Lewis, 'I really think this may be our vocation. There are a good lot of us altogether, and we are all used to private
theatricals. Why should we not go on for money instead of love? They cleared six-and-twenty pounds by our acting for the Chinese famine last year, you know. A dozen goes like that would more than clear Rupert's expenses for the year, which is one important matter. And I don't know what else I'm good for, at my age.'

'Not regularly on the stage?'

'No; in this semi-public way—out of doors chiefly. People would be glad of us for their entertainments, and recommend us one to the other. Here's my Lady Willingham to chaperon you, if you'll come and do propriety and the cruel mothers, Aunt Nance.'

'Well!' said Miss Dorset, meditatively, 'it would be great fun, and Juliet would enjoy it.'

'By the bye, when do Aunt Marian and Juliet come home?'

'The day after to-morrow. That horrid dentist keeps them for another day's torture. When they do come, you'll get two antipodes of opinions, Master Lewis.'

'Poor Aunt Marian! But you'll make her swallow it, Aunt Anne. Ask her what else I'm fit for, except breaking stones on the road, or writing penny dreadfuls, which she would not like much better.'

'Mr. Armysage's servant called for a note, my lady,' said the servant at the door.

'Let him wait a moment.'

'There! you chatter so, I've hardly begun,' said Selva. 'Dear Mrs. Armytage, we hope to be able to act "The Rivals" on the 31st. What more?'

'Oh, that will do! No use going into the future. I'll go over and manage that,' said Lewis. 'Explain that the performers are the objects of charity, and ask Ernley to do the giant in the yellow van.'
A light heart was a heritage that Anne Dorset and her nephew Lewis Willingham possessed in common. They were a good deal alike in character, bright, good, practical people, doing much useful work, and winning many hearts by their warm good-nature and friendliness, acting up to sound religious principles, yet not going very deep. Nothing seemed to touch them to any innermost depth, and yet they were very affectionate, avoided all they perceived to be evil, had good, pure, sound tastes, exerted themselves in good works, did generous things in the easiest, most playful manner, and met trouble with the like gaieté du cœur. There were differences of course between the old maid and the young soldier, but the foundations (if there were any) were essentially the same.
CHAPTER II

MY VOCATION

I'm sure, Lewis, it's uncommonly good of you to think so much of my future. Of course it's a pity to give up one's last year at Oxford. But I'm not so fond of acting as the rest of you. I'd rather take a clerkship in the Bank; I'd rather chuck up Oxford and go abroad, than feel such a stick—such an oaf—such a fool, as I do on a platform!

The speaker was a fair, big youth of twenty, a handsome likeness of Sir Lewis, and as he spoke he sat heavily down on the smallest white and gold chair in Lady Willingham's drawing-room, and fixed a pair of large blue eyes upon his brother in disconsolate appeal.

'Oh, nonsense, Rupert,' said Selva, looking cheerfully up from her tea-cups. 'We settled it all the day before yesterday; Lewis has seen Mrs. Armytage, and she thinks it a splendid idea, and will suggest us to her friends. You always get on capitally, and people say how well you look.'

'Well!' said Rupert, 'of course, if you're doing it partly on my account, and as a provision for the baby—But I do hope, Selva, that you won't set me to act with Juliet. It's all very well with Agnes. She speaks her speeches and goes on quietly, but Juliet—you'd think it was all real. I declare, when she did
Kate Hardcastle, and I was that idiot Marlow, I did positively feel as if it was me she was making game of; I—I felt quite ashamed of myself.

Lewis and Selva both laughed.

'So much the better,' said Selva. 'But we mustn't give Jetty too much swing. She'll want to begin with "Macbeth."'

'Besides, her money is all safe,' said Lewis, 'and if she refused——'

'Lewis! Lewis! I never was so delighted! Of course I'll cast in my lot with you. It's a glorious, grand, unconventional, brave plan, and I honour you for it, Lewis and Selva; and you shall have all there is of me to help you with all my might!'

'Oh, wait till we begin,' groaned Rupert, as a small, slight girl in gray came with a rush across the hall and into the room, sending her clear, sweet 'carrying' voice before her, and finally throwing herself into Selva's arms, at the cost of a tremendous shake and rattle of the tea-cups.

Even close beside Lady Willingham's Irish loveliness, she showed as a very pretty girl. Her bright curly hair was piled on the top of her small head, and turned off her forehead in vigorous natural waves, so full of life and spring as to add to the spirited look of her delicate, pointed face. Her hazel eyes, under dark, delicately-drawn, level brows, were full of animation and purpose, her face was all change and movement.

'Tell me all about it,' she continued. 'What are you going to do! Aunt Marian so fell upon Aunt Nance that I fled and left them to fight it out.'

'But you must distinctly understand, Juliet, that your position is unaltered. There is no occasion for you to exert yourself.'
‘Exert myself? Occasion? Do you think, Lewis, that now, at the end of the nineteenth century, I’m going to be a mere young lady, because I’ve three hundred a year of my own? No! I can’t be a nurse or teacher. Girls, if they’ve anything in them, don’t marry much nowadays; and marriage wouldn’t suit me. I have always longed to go on the stage. I know I can; and here’s the opening. I think the bank-breaking is providential.’

‘If I was your guardian,’ growled Rupert, ‘and you went into such a state of excitement, you should have nothing to do with it.’

‘Dear boy, you know nothing about excitement,’ said Juliet, with a soft air of elderly superiority. ‘Besides, you know I was twenty-one in March. But tell me all about it, Lewis, at once.’

‘Well, Mrs. Armytage has engaged us for the 31st, and wants “The Rivals.” So if there were enough of the old set together——’

‘Enough? “Who is it wishes for more men from England! My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin. Not one man more to share the glory,” as King Harry said. Oh, I should like to act him!’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Sir Lewis; ‘but you can’t play two parts at once, for all the glory in the world. However, if you’ll hold your tongue, I’ll explain. We intend to announce ourselves as an “Old Comedy Company——”’

‘Yes, yes,’ interposed Juliet. ‘Amateur audiences like it, we do it rather well, and our good-breeding tells in it.’

‘Well; Aunt Nance, you know, is just made for Mrs. Malaprop. Selva is Lucy, you and Ernley Armytage can be Julia and Falkland; because
Agnes knows Lydia, and she likes best to act with Rupert.’

Juliet made a face, but said, ‘Well!’ in a resigned tone.

‘Jolly old Major O’Connor is always our Sir Lucius; Bob Acres is my best part. I’m going to coach Dolph for Fag. Then Buckley isn’t so bad as Sir Anthony. We can find a David.’

‘It’s all straight for once,’ said Juliet. ‘But will they go on with us?’

‘Armytage will, jolly old giant, till he gets a ship, and probably the Major, and I daresay we could often get Buckley. Of course we pay expenses, or they share profits. We’ll work that out square somehow. And if we’re short-handed I daresay some of the old “Stars” would help us. I used to act with Musgrave and his “Undiscovered Stars,” a capital dramatic company.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Juliet; ‘you know I was at Rowhurst with the Luscombes before I joined Aunt Min. They took me twice to matinées at the “Planet”—beautiful pieces. And one Sunday, Mr. Musgrave came down to tea, and brought with him one of the actors, a very clever one, Mr. Clarence Burnet.’

‘Ay,’ said Sir Lewis, ‘I met Burnet some years ago, and have seen him act often. His cousin, young Lambourne, was stage-struck when I was with the “Stars.” There was a romantic story, his father made a mêsalliance, and married Burnet’s aunt, a gipsy, people say. Then there was a cruel guardian and other complications. Young Lambourne insisted on taking up his cousin, and they came to London together, and took to the stage. Lambourne dropped it when he came into his property, and married, but I be-
lieve he has always been an odd fish. They were both odd gipsy-looking fellows. Burnet's a clever man.'

'Yes, very tall and dark, and not at all like the popular notion of an actor. He was so grave, he made the Rowhurst curate seem quite frivolous. I talked to him, I asked him how people began to get on, on the stage, and he gave an odd sort of smile and said, "By working hard and taking their luck." I asked him if it was very difficult for a girl to make a beginning there, and he said, "Sometimes."'

'Why, Juliet,' said Selva, 'did you mean to ask him for an introduction?'

'Oh, well,' said Juliet, half-laughing, half serious, 'knowledge never comes amiss. I've often thought I'd like to go and call on Irving, and ask him to give me his candid opinion.'

'How many candid opinions do you think he is asked for in a year?' said Rupert.

'Well!' returned Juliet, cheerfully; 'now, he'll perhaps have heard beforehand of the sensation I shall make.'

'Now, Juliet,' said Rupert, 'I do hope you're not going to think of making a sensation. If we're to get through this business, and I'm sure I'm awfully obliged to Lewis and Selva for their goodness, we must just take it quietly and act in a rational manner. If you go having inspirations we shall be done for.'

'Or floated up to the heights of fame!' cried Juliet, clapping her hands. 'Goodness, there are the aunts! Aunt Min's going to enter a protest. I shall go and kiss baby.'

She flew out of the room as she spoke, turning back her bright face to declaim effectively, 'Don't be talked over—
"Come one, come all; this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I."

But I am flying!

Juliet was one of those girls, who, as Miss Marian Dorset was wont to put it, are 'rather an anxiety' to their family.

She was the orphan daughter of a younger brother of General Willingham, but as her mother had been one of the Dorset cousinhood, she lived with the two Misses Dorset, who regarded her entirely as a niece, and had grown up on sisterly terms with the Willinghams. Sir Lewis, guardian though he might have been in law, would have found it hard to interfere with her, even when, as Rupert said, 'she had got her head full of jolly-robins.'

Those much-abused little birds certainly sang a good many rousing airs to her, and as she had at once the innocence and the inconsiderateness of an intense and enthusiastic nature, it was not impossible that she might have called on Mr. Irving with a view to hearing his opinion of her dramatic capabilities. She brought more life and fire into her cousins' favourite amusement than they quite knew, but she did not always help it off well on the surface, being inconveniently painstaking herself, and critical of her fellow actors. She was also liable to sudden ideas as to the right way of taking a situation, out of which no one could argue her, and with her ringing tones and constant movements, altogether untrained, her effects were apt to be out of proportion to the rest. 'Miss Agnes Willingham was always so lady-like, but Miss Juliet's acting was very pronounced,' as one of their county patronesses had said.

Some of her cousins thought her shallow, but, though she was undeveloped for her age, there was
plenty of genuine stuff beneath her wild spirits. Acting was to her an art, not an amusement, and she gave very little thought to all the incidental gaiety and pleasure that would accompany the scheme of the 'Strolling Players,' in comparison with the joys of the acting itself, and the satisfaction of hard, justifiable work at it.

Now, after she had paid her respects to the infant hope of the Willinghams, her mind turned instantly to her performance of Julia in 'The Rivals,' and how she could improve that rather unattractive part. She knew, with certainty that was not conceit, that she could have played Lydia Languish infinitely better than her cousin, but that, in Agnes's hands, the sentimental Julia would have been intolerable. Suddenly a new idea struck her, and she ran back into the drawing-room. 'Lewis—Lewis! We must have a name like the "Stars." Let us be the "Wills o' the Wisp," flashing out all of a sudden when no one expects it of us. Willingshams shining in the darkness of ruin and desolation!'

'Oh, my dear Juliet!' exclaimed Miss Marian Dorset; 'such a name is quite ominous.'

'Not a bit of it, Min,' said Miss Anne, cheerfully. 'It's a very good notion. You know the Jack o' Lanterns themselves are always quite jolly in the bogs. It's only the audience we shall lead astray; and as I shall be the chief light, I am much too substantial to tread in quagmires.'

'It's a very good notion,' cried Selva, jumping up, and elevating her tea-cup. 'Here's to the success of the "Wills o' the Wisp, Old Comedy and Pastoral Play Company," and may they win fame, fortune, and fun.'
‘Hip, hip hurrah!’ cried Lewis, Miss Anne, and Juliet, in chorus.

‘Shake hands, Aunt Marian,’ said Rupert, turning round to his elder aunt; ‘and please keep a rope handy to throw to us when we’re beginning to sink.’
A group stood waiting for the train on the platform of Coalham station. Two were clergymen, one a sturdy, hard-working, resolute-looking man on the younger side of middle age; the other a tall, dark-eyed lad, whose long black coat did not conceal his lithe, graceful outlines.

The others were a bright, lively little lady, insignificant till her countenance was studied with its thoughtfulness and power of brilliancy; the other a tall, stately maiden, in slight mourning, brown-haired, blue-eyed, regular in feature, lovely in the subdued colouring of her complexion, altogether far above the average in beauty, but at present with a look of disappointment in the almost pensive eyes.

'And you really are not going home with Bessie?' said the younger man.

'No; Lewis is peremptory! I am so vexed, I did so want to see Stokesley,' replied the girl.

'Perhaps it is better for Stokesley that it should be left to your imagination,' said the elder clergyman.

'It is a very homely place.'

'So much the better,' she returned. 'A real thorough going country parish is so delightful! Not but'—she added in haste—'that I do enjoy the full
life and work and reality of a place like this. I hope I shall be the better for it all my life.'

The train was snorting up at that moment, and doors were opened; the bags and umbrellas that were being held for the two ladies were put into a carriage.

'Oh, but!' cried the girl, 'not first class! O Mr. Harry, I told you mine was to be third, like Miss Merrifield's.'

'What was to be done, when Bessie told me to get a first class for her?' said Harry, smiling; 'I obeyed the elder, as in duty bound.'

So they were both launched into the honourable seclusion of a coupé, and so immediately shunted backwards, beyond the verge of the platform that no further farewells were possible.

'I didn't mean it,' sighed the girl.

'But I did,' was the answer; 'I am sure your brother would not like you to come on alone in the third class after I leave you.'

'Oh, my brother! he would not care. He is easy-going enough; and besides, I believe we are all going to be very poor.'

'Then the bad news is true? I am sorry. Is that the reason he hurries you home?'

'I wish it was, it would be more to the purpose; but it is about some private theatricals.'

There was a pause caused by a complication of horrid noises emitted by the various engines, during which the ladies gazed out at a smoky world of roofs and chimneys, in the midst of which rose a thin spike of bell-turret, like a nearly closed parasol. The girl feasted her eyes on it as long as the train would allow her, and when another jerk took her out of sight of it,
she breathed a sigh of—'Good-bye, dear St. Cuthbert's! I'm glad to have had another look,' and then applied herself to a letter which she took from her bag. Her companion thought it more sympathetic to study her own provision of literature.

Agnes Willingham had been staying with a school friend, the daughter of Canon Wharton, the Rector of St. Mary's, the parent parish church of Coalham, where for nearly a lifetime he had been struggling to make religious opportunities keep pace with the rapid growth of the colliery and factory town; where mission after mission sprang up under his care, and gradually developed into churches with districts of their own. He and his wife still reigned, in a manner, over all, and were the centres of the system, in an old-fashioned rectory that still preserved its grounds, and with a venerable church of many styles, which had been supplemented instead of being spoilt by additions.

His former curates, even when converted into vicars, almost always craved for his counsel and sympathy, and until they married, kept up their old custom of the Sunday evening supper at the Rectory, which Mrs. Wharton declared, secured their being properly fed once on that day of unrest to the clergy.

There are some houses that seem to have a peculiar atmosphere of their own, perhaps best expressed by

'Around the very place did brood
A calm and holy quietude.'

A 'quietude' not at all inconsistent either with incessant occupation, or innocent merriment, but rather caused by a certain spiritual atmosphere, a working in, and living for, one great object ever present; and into this calm and happy world Agnes had found herself
admitted, when, about fifteen months before, her first visit had been paid. She had always been rather a grave girl, and the school at which she and Alice Wharton had met, had strengthened her religious feelings, so that she was prepared to enter into the charm of the life at the Rectory, which she felt without analysing it till she missed it.

Constant work, frequent interruption, unfailing sympathy and aid for all who needed it, interest in all subjects of the day, household mirth, yet all without bustle, and all subordinated to the one great service, expressed in the daily and weekly prayers, praise and offering in the church, which dedicated all besides as an offering to the glory of God.

This it was that seemed to give at once zest, flavour, and calm to all that passed at the rectory. Agnes took her share in the occupations there, and contributed her really beautiful singing at several of the parish and society entertainments given by her friends—as, indeed, she had often done at home—where her family were always ready to assist in such good works as commended themselves to their good nature and were not too troublesome. Her home was by no means irreligious, but what was duty there, was love and life in this other region. Her enthusiasm was all awake, chiefly for the grand old Canon, and then for the ex-curate, now Vicar of St. Cuthbert’s; the very hardest of all the districts to deal with—but where the earnestness, force, and geniality of the Reverend David Merrifield had had great effect for good—and with him worked his much younger cousin, Harry Merrifield, a sort of grand-curate to the Canon. What the beautiful, good, and eager girl was to the Vicar and his curate, she at least never thought, though, perhaps, Mrs. Wharton did, and
sometimes wondered. Both cousins were members of large families, but a family living was in the gift of Harry Merrifield's maternal uncle, Mr. Mohun, and it was only doubtful whether it might not fall while the nephew was still thought too young for the charge, in which case David Merrifield might be selected.

However, all this had gone no further than the good lady's imagination, when Agnes had been summoned home by her father's illness. When she made her second visit, a few months after his death, there was all the same delight, perhaps even more appreciation of the peace, after the business debates and alarms that had already set in at Ousehaven—but perhaps the elder Mr. Merrifield was fuller than before of parish work, for he haunted the Rectory less, while his young cousin haunted it more. However, before the end of the sojourn, the Vicar's sister, Elizabeth Merrifield, came to stay with him. She was a few years older than himself, and under the name of Mesa was a somewhat distinguished authoress; but she was an entirely congenial element in the Coalham circle, and soon attracted that passionate love from Agnes that a young girl often feels for a superior woman of ready sympathies. No doubt she saw the game, and the unconscious rivalship, even if she received no voluntary confidence from her brother; and by and by, Agnes was extremely delighted by an invitation to return with Elizabeth, and make her a visit at Stokesley, the family home.

This, however, was frustrated by a letter from her brother, telling her that he wanted her at home at once. She had written again to beg for at least two days at Stokesley, but had been told that the engagement to act at Armytage Park rendered it impossible. This
letter was what she was re-reading after the start, and at last she laid it down in her lap, and leant back with a heavy sigh and look of distress and perplexity. Then meeting her companion's kind look, she said, 'Oh! I wish you would tell me, what do you think about these theatricals?'

'I suppose I must say—as about everything else—that depends.'

'I thought you could not bear them, your people at least. I am sure I heard your cousin say his father would not hear of his sisters acting, as they could never dare to face their aunt at Stokesley.'

'Harry put it rather strongly, but we certainly have an old-world grain in us, that makes our whole clan rather particular, shall I say?'

'Then you don't like it?'

'I couldn't act to save my life, but I don't regard other people's doing so with the pious horror that some of my family do,' said Elizabeth. 'Of course, on one side it may be most undesirable, but on the other, it may be the brightest, most innocent child's play.

"In semblance proud of warrior's mail
   The stripling shall appear;
   The maiden meek in robe and veil
   Will mimic bridal gear."'

'These are the two ends of the scale,' said Agnes. 'I was thinking of private theatricals.'

'I know you were, and it is exactly a case of depending upon all the interrogative pronouns and adverbs; who, where, what, why, and how.'

'As to what,' said Agnes, 'it is my eldest brother who is perfectly devoted to them, and so is my cousin Juliet, who raves about them. We have quite a little company in the town, all intimate. My youngest aunt
really enjoys it as much as any one, and we have generally acted either for pure amusement or for some charitable purpose.'

'And of course, whatever you act is of the right sort.'

'Oh yes, none of us would have anything else; but——'

'You don't like it.'

'Well, when we come to a dress rehearsal, I can begin to feel as if I were somebody else, and I don't mind it so much; but I don't act half so well as the others, and I really don't know if it is not conceit that makes me hate it so much altogether, besides other reasons.'

'And they can't do without you?'

'They say they can't, partly because of my singing; Juliet is not musical, and Selva has a pretty little voice, but it is not trained, and is not to be heard, except in a room. Besides, two girls are often wanted. Lewis would be dreadfully vexed and angry if I refused, but I would do so if I were sure that it was really wrong.'

Elizabeth Merrifield, as she thought of the effect upon her relations of hearing of Miss Willingham acting before a semi-public, almost wished she could in conscience say it was wrong; but this was certainly untrue, and she could only answer, 'If you do it in this way, and to gratify your own people, there can be nothing wrong in consenting to help them.'

'I did not expect that they would have wanted to do it within the year,' sighed Agnes, thinking of her father's death.

'People feel so differently on those matters. Men take lines of their own.'
'Well, if it be not absolutely wrong, I suppose it would be worse to upset all their plans for mere distaste and reluctance,' sighed Agnes; and Elizabeth, looking at her striking face and figure, could not help feeling a certain surprise at her total insensibility to the admiration that her beauty could not fail to excite. She wondered too, whether either David or Harry had any share in this same repugnance. And which?
CHAPTER IV

INEVITABLE

The Misses Dorset lived on in the house that had been the family home for many generations, and which would have been far too expensive for them but for its situation.

Holland had evidently furnished the model to the original owner, for the house was tall, and had a steep roof, broken by queer little dormer windows of a red brick modified by time, with elaborate stone quoins and tall doorway, opening on a broad flight of stone steps, heavy sash windows, and a walled court leading to the street. On the other side, it was as near the sluggish estuary as safety permitted, and indeed, in certain conjunctions of wind and tide, the cabbages, not to say the lawn, became acquainted with salt water; although it appeared to Miss Dorset's friends, as if by far the greater portion of their time there was little to be seen from the window save an expanse of mud, with the river lazily creeping through it, and green banks and white houses shining beyond. The vessels, when there were any to see, could only be discerned from the broad balcony that ran round the great bay of the drawing-room. Inside, the house was panelled, painted white, and provided with as many heavy doors and big windows as could possibly
be got into the compass of each room; but the oak staircase was very handsome and very comfortable, and the broad handrail was a delightful place for gymnastics of all degrees.

As to the furniture, most of it had suffered a period of degradation to the servants' hall, attics, and nurseries, till it had been of late dug out with rapture, mended, renovated, and installed in the places of honour, while all the Regency articles that had not become favourites had in their turn to go into retirement.

Miss Dorset's own particular sitting-room, opening out of the drawing-room, was entirely of the rosewood and chintz period, to her, the old and beloved. She was fifteen years older than her sister Anne, and had never had such strong health, having been forced to become head of the household, and to mother young brothers and sisters so early that the strain had been overmuch for her bodily strength, though not for her mental vigour.

She was not exactly an invalid, but she was obliged to take care of herself and not overtax her powers, and it was understood that while her sister and Juliet had their own occupations within and without, she sat alone in her pretty, quiet room, with her cockatoo, her cat, and her canary birds, her books, her letters, and her accounts, looking like an old fairy, especially when she put on her cap, which she never did if she could help it.

It was an ominous thing when any one of the family knocked at her door before half-past one, and of late she had had only too many of such knocks.

This time it was Agnes whose voice asked 'May I come in, Aunt Minnie?'

'Ah! I thought you would be here,' said her aunt. 'So they have sprung the mine on you, poor child.'
that little wild pussy cat Juliet, to have you among them.'

'Very well, aunt,' said Agnes, drooping her head a little in resignation, with the feeling 'If Aunt Marian does not uphold me, it is all up with me!'

Miss Dorset looked at her with a doubt whether the heart had any part in her reluctance, and whether any prospects could be imperilled by her sharing in the scheme of the 'Wills o' the Wisp.' But with all her shrewdness, Marion Dorset belonged to a reticent generation which would not try to draw back the veil or make revelations to a spirit as yet unconscious. She was not sure either that the idea of the beautiful Agnes giving her heart to a clergyman in the Black Country was attractive to her.
CHAPTER V

'Mr. Harris, be not alarmed, not reg'lar play-actors—"hammertoors!"'

See Life of Dickens.

When the 'Wills o' the Wisp' started on their professional career, the objectors to and the promoters of the scheme were about equally ignorant of the real difficulty of it. Agnes felt vaguely that the publicity and display went against her tastes, and knew also, somewhat vaguely, that some people would not think it quite nice; but she had no definite objections to bring forward. Rupert, to whom on first coming home she had appealed, had stated that he did not think it was wrong or even undesirable, he wished it was; in his opinion it was simply beastly.

Aunt Nance regarded it as only an extension of old habits, likely to lead to seeing their friends in pleasant ways, and not making any real difference in their lives. Sir Lewis was the only one of the party who had ever acted outside their own somewhat unsophisticated neighbourhood, and he had never had anything to do with the management of any other company. His connection with the 'Undiscovered Stars' had been brief, and, naturally he had not troubled himself at all as to the sort of people with whom he had to play. He was a fairly good actor of character parts, a little careless and happy-go-lucky; but with plenty of dash and fire, and, like Miss Anne, some natural
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humour. He was the star of the amateurs in the neighbourhood, and had got up parochial entertainments for every clergyman for miles round, who would allow his school or parish-room to be used for such purposes, and on such lines was a skilful and popular stage-manager.

The dramatic company of Ousehaven had numbered sundry amateurs who could not be expected to come beyond their own circle, and would not have been worth training at any price, as Lewis said. However, young Buckley was not without talent of a certain kind. He was a tall, slim youth, with rather pretty girlish features, dark eyes, and a cherished little black moustache, and had always been clever in scene painting, stage carpentry, and arranging. He had nothing to do in the office, and being the only son among a family of sisters, was allowed so much of his own way that he was unmolested in adhering to his friends.

'Poor dear George,' said his mother, 'I am glad he has something to occupy him in good society!'

Ernley Armytage was the younger brother of a neighbouring squire. He was a lieutenant in the navy, who had been severely wounded in Egypt, and since that time had been so constantly harassed by recurring fever as to be unfit for service. He had just now been considered able to apply for employment, and was heartily tired of doing nothing; besides that there was an attraction among the Willingham, to which his sailor heart was decidedly accessible.

He had always been the prime actor on board his ships, and was supposed to excel, especially in the heroic line; for he was very tall and large, much too big for a sailor, and was commonly called in the
company 'The Giant.' He was very good looking, though heavy, even though fined down by illness, and was the soul of good humour and courtesy, a regular pièce de résistance.

The other member of the troupe was Major O'Connor—a kind old friend who had settled in the town for love of his former Colonel, the elder Sir Lewis, and had married a young wife and lost her early. He kept near her grave, and retained a fatherly interest in the young people, who could make him do whatever they chose.

'Go with you, little one?' he said, when Juliet propounded the scheme. 'What! and make a fool of myself?'

'That's as it may happen,' replied Juliet, demurely. 'We'll keep Olivia's fool for you. Come now, Major, you know no one else can do Sir Lucius. We can't get on without you.'

'And that's true,' said the Major. 'A pack of hare-brained youngsters, as you are! You need a heavy father to keep you in order. Oh yes, I'll be after you, and help Miss Anne to keep you out of mischief.'

Last, but not least, there was Dolph, otherwise Dorset Willingham Adolphus Cobb, the only child of a former maidservant, first of the one family, then of the other, who had married a tailor in a small way, and died after a few years. Dolph, something of a pet, and a good deal of an imp, was preternaturally clever, and galloped through the standards at the utmost rate possible. The ladies would fain have made him a pupil teacher, but he was absurdly small in stature, and neither the master nor the boys liked him—never being sure whether he was not laughing
at them—nor had he arrived at the virtue of being patient with stupidity. Moreover, his father, who was going down in health and prosperity, claimed his unpaid assistance. But in two years the poor tailor died, and as the others of his trade were abhorred by Dolph for having destroyed his custom, and would as soon have had a monkey for an apprentice—as one of them told Miss Dorset—the boy was on the world, and was finally disposed of at the Bank as office-boy. He was a creature who excited strong likes or dislikes—and had a reputation for tricks and sauciness which his friends repelled. They could truly state that evidence never brought a misdeed home to him, and that it was his queer elfish face and twinkling eyes, with the convulsive chuckling of his neighbours, that roused suspicions. A very solemn curate had insisted on his being turned out of the choir—unjustly, as the organist and Juliet held, especially as the others had behaved no better without him. But he had always been the main strength of the recitations and other entertainments of the Band of Hope, and after hours, was delighted to turn his hand and heart to anything, so that he had often assisted in the local theatricals of the Willinghams.

He had got on fairly at the Bank, but old Mr. Buckley could not endure him, and always attributed every accident to his mischief. So when the question had been raised by Agnes as to what was to become of him, Lewis's answer was—

'He is one of the reductions—Buckley would not have him at any price.'

'Besides, he is indispensable to us,' said Juliet. 'He is small enough for Puck, and makes up big enough for Fag, and he has the spirit of it.'
'He can pack, and he can sew, and knows the use of a hammer and nails,' added Lewis. 'It is quite true! He is a mere necessity.'

'But what can be done with him in the intervals,' put in Miss Dorset. 'I thought Agnes was going to get him taken as an errand-boy somewhere.'

'Well,' said Agnes reluctantly, 'I did propose Rowe's library to him, where he could take out the books; but the poor boy went into a state of despair, and I am afraid he showed his theatrical capacities, for he clasped his hands over his bosom, and implored me to speak for him. Wages was no object, he would do anything if only he might stay with Sir Lewis and help sometimes in the plays—with him and Miss Juliet—as was all he cared for on this blessed earth. I really was afraid he would go on his knees to me, and he had tears in his eyes.'

'It's a clear case of mutual affinity,' said Lewis.

'The boy will be spoilt, utterly spoilt,' said Aunt Marion. 'What is not intolerable for you who have something to fall back on, is a different thing for him, at his age too; you'll have him going off with some disreputable circus—'

'I'll take care of that,' said Lewis.

'And,' said Miss Anne, 'the surest way of spoiling is to give a violent twist in an alien direction.'

'In fact, the spoiling is a fait accompli,' said Miss Dorset.

'And,' said her sister, 'he would be far more likely to run away from Rowe's than if we were to employ him more congenially; and we might find a safe opening.'

'Nonsense! we must have him here,' added Lewis; 'that's a fact!'
'Well,' said Aunt Marian, with a sigh, 'that being the case, I suppose we must have him here to help James when you are not at home. At any rate, it will keep him out of mischief.'

'I was thinking that the number might be too much for James,' said Miss Anne, 'when you come down to us.'

'Aunt Minnie, you are a very jewel of an aunt!' exclaimed Selva.

'Will James think so? Poor James!' sighed Aunt Marian.

For James was the old man-servant inherited from their father, of mighty weight in the household, alike physically and morally.

James, however, had to give way on this point.

Mrs. Armytage, partly for her son's sake, proved a most useful ally, and procured two other engagements for them during the first fortnight of July, one for a great Conservative Festival to be held at Lassington Castle, a nobleman's seat out of the Willinghams' beat of visiting; and another to act at a bazaar in aid of a Children's Hospital at Homesworth, a large town in a neighbouring county. She also advised them to get some sort of programme printed, which could be sent about from one friend to another, and serve as an advertisement.

The drawing up of this proved to be a difficult matter. It soon became evident that, to pay all expenses, including the purchase and hiring of wigs and costumes, and to leave a sufficient profit, the charge for pieces on the scale of 'The Rivals' would have to be far too large for any but the most public and important occasions. Smaller and shorter pieces must therefore be added to the list.
Their selection did not err on the side of diffidence, but included 'Shakespeare,' 'Old Comedy,' and Sir Lewis Willingham's compositions, with equal audacity.

Their simple little programme having been drawn up and sent to the printers, Sir Lewis proceeded to work his company very hard with preparations and rehearsals; and, before the first performance, the difficulty of depending on people with prior claims on their time made itself felt.

Agnes and Juliet were responsible for sundry pieces of parochial work, and were also engaged in the usual classes, lectures, and mutual improvement societies with which young ladies amuse and interest themselves in large country towns. Juliet, as soon as she saw how things were going, gave up all her share in these occupations. She could not, she said, do justice to Lewis's scheme unless she gave her whole time and thoughts to it. Agnes could not deny the force of this; but it went to her heart and pricked her conscience to resign her evening class for young women in business, her district visiting, and all the other good works into which she felt that her visit to Coalham had poured new life.

'Aunt Nance means to keep on with the Branch Secretaryship and with the Cambridge examination business,' she said.

'Aunt Nance will get into a muddle,' replied Juliet. 'Besides, the case is not similar. She can get more people to help her, and she doesn't study her acting; she just does it as nature tells her, and she'll never do it differently or get beyond the lively knack of it. But you and I have got a great deal to learn. We have never been really criticised yet; we've been thought wonderful for the Miss Willingshams. Each
one of these parts has got to be thought out and invented.'

'Why,' said Agnes, 'when I know the words, I always hope the way to say them will come.'

'And does it?' said Juliet, rather drily.

'I shouldn't know how to do it beforehand.'

'Why, I see it all quite clear. It is so tiresome when Rupert will stand in a different place every time, and spoil all one's effect!'

'I don't suppose the audience notice. But really, Jetty, I can't see how George Buckley, or any one who has any profession, can take it up in that way. And he will get something to do, I suppose.'

'Nor I,' returned Juliet. 'I don't see it either, unless we kept to very small pieces, and Lewis won't do that.'

'Then how can the scheme go on?'

'Schemes have to be modified sometimes. It does for a beginning. But really, Agnes, I don't see why you should be so miserable. I think Lewis and Selva are perfectly splendid. They never fret and grumble. Do you suppose they like giving up their home and looking on the aunts' as their home, as the kind old things call it? It is very hard lines on them. And, as for what people think, I don't begin to care for what people think when I know I am doing right! Are you afraid the Whartons won't like it? I'm sure Mr. Luscombe is every bit as good a clergyman as Canon Wharton; Rowhurst is a lovely parish, and the church is sweet—so old and solemn. He doesn't object to it. I've had a letter from Gertrude; and their friends, the Lambournes, quite belong to all your Whartons and people. And Mr. Lambourne was on the stage himself once. Canon Wharton preached at Rowhurst once
when I was there. There was a Mr. Martin Lambourne that was a kind of a saint; and the Rev. Alaric wrote a book called the Country Pastor. Canon Wharton said it helped on the new methods of work immensely; but I don't know if he is the same as the one who acted.'

Juliet fired off this logical uniting of the Church and the Stage at intervals, with her head in a box out of which she was turning theatrical costumes; while Agnes sat by the window sewing in Lydia Languish's lace ruffles. She was much the best dressmaker and milliner of the party, and contriving costumes was one of her chief stage duties.

'That book was written forty years ago; I saw it at Coalham. I don't think the present Mr. Lambourne is at all that sort of person. I believe he's a Radical!'

'Oh, well, never mind,' said Juliet; 'you know we can act at Primrose fêtes, and do good in that way. But, Agnes'—standing up in the midst of a heap of royal robes, fairy skirts, hats and feathers, crowns, coronets, and with a large donkey's head belonging to the part of Bottom, in her arms—'I'm going to work hard, and so must you if we're not all to make fools of ourselves in public.'

Poor Agnes sighed as she daintily set in her lace. Perhaps she would rather have known herself to be justly blamed by some of her Coalham friends, than have to condemn them for narrow-mindedness in blaming her.

Probably Sir Lewis and Lady Willingham did shut out the hard facts of their loss of fortune from their minds by the perpetual demands of the new plan on their attention.

The difficulties were surmounted or succumbed to,
it was not very easy to say which; the theatrical wardrobes were all packed up, and on the 30th of June 'The Wills o' the Wisp' drove over in a couple of waggonettes to Armytage Park for the performance of 'The Rivals.' Dolph, who, as proposed, had been cast for Fag, being literally the fag of the party.

The audience consisted of the Armytages' tenants and of the neighbouring families, who had all seen the Willingham's act so often before, that even Agnes could not feel as if facing the public.

'The Rivals' was to be played in a large barn, in which a fairly good stage had been erected.

All the audience could see, and if those behind could not hear, they did not know that they ought to have done so, and were delighted with the gay dresses and the fine show, the pretty young ladies, and the dancing and fighting, the rapid action of the piece. Miss Anne was a capital Mrs. Malaprop. Bob Acres suited Lewis well. Fag was an unexpected success. Sir Lucius's Irish accent was undoubted. Mr. Buckley interposed with effect in Sir Antony Absolute. Few people had any preconceived ideas of Lydia Languish, and so did not know how unlike Agnes's reticent stately grace was to the sentimental, sulky, charming and gushing little heroine; while Rupert looked so handsome in uniform that nobody considered how utterly impossible it would have been for him to run off with an heiress or sustain a disguise. Mr. Armytage was solemn as Falkland, and Juliet made more of her part than any one gave her credit for.

All ended happily, and actors and audience were alike delighted. Even Agnes felt that it was not nearly so disagreeable as she had expected. Only Juliet stood for a moment when the curtain had been
drawn up to give light and air, and the audience were filing out for supper, looking down the rows of seats. ‘Satisfied, Jetty?’ said Lewis gaily, as he collected his pistols and other properties.

‘Y—es,’ said Juliet doubtfully; ‘but I didn’t seem to feel as far as the back benches.’

‘I’m sure they could hear well enough,’ said Sir Lewis.

‘I know what you mean, Miss Juliet,’ said Dolph, confidentially, as he put out the footlights, causing a fearful smell of paraffine to arise. ‘I didn’t feel somehow as if I did it big enough.’

‘That’s it, Dolph,’ said Juliet. ‘No more did I.’
CHAPTER VI

BEFORE THE PUBLIC

The Conservative fête at Lassington Castle somewhat enlarged the experiences of the 'Wills o' the Wisp.' They played 'She Stoops to Conquer' in the evening in the great ball-room, and scenes from the 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' out of doors in the afternoon.

Everybody was very courteous and gracious, Mr. Buckley and one or two others of the Ousehaven helpers felt themselves to be in high society; but the chief event of importance was that Lord Lassington, as he thanked Sir Lewis, paid a very marked compliment to Juliet's acting, so as to show the manager that little Juliet was undoubtedly his star, and the hope of his undertaking. She was made to feel herself that she had been a success, and the encouragement was good for her, for all the while every performance gave her a keener sense of the defects and incongruities of the whole company, her own included.

The Homesworth bazaar was to last two days. Dramatic performances were to be given each evening, apart from the actual sale, and high prices had been charged for the best places at them. Recitations or shorter pieces were also wished for at intervals during the afternoon as an additional attraction to the 'Street
in Cairo,' which the Drill Hall at Homesworth was supposed to represent.

They had no friends in Homesworth; but to lessen the expense and so increase the profits, the committee of the bazaar offered to entertain them, and they were billeted upon the chief houses of the place. Sir Lewis and Lady Willingham found themselves the guests of the Mayor, a nice old gentleman, much pleased at having to entertain a baronet, and quite unable to believe that the said baronet was there for anything but his own amusement and the benefit of the charity. Agnes and Juliet went to the Rectory, the other members of the troupe were variously disposed of, and Miss Dorset found herself the guest of Mrs. Martin Lambourne, who lived in Homesworth, near which place her late husband had lived and worked, before his uncle had left him the vicarage of Monk's Warren in Heathshire, and the guardianship of the present squire, who had married his cousin, Martin Lambourne's only child. Mrs. Lambourne was a fresh-coloured sensible lady, great in many good works, and as Miss Dorset was, at present, more familiar with the *G.F.S. Advertiser* than with the *Era* or the *Dramatic News*, and nearly as much interested in it, they found many connecting links before touching on theatrical topics.

Miss Nance was to play Mrs. Hardcastle, and the severe mother of the hero in 'A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,' at the two evening performances which were to take place in a large concert room above the Drill Hall; but she did not sing or recite, and so had leisure to help her hostess with the arrangement of her stall, and, by the help of a little art muslin and a couple of Indian shawls, she transformed herself into a most appropriate and attractive saleswoman for a Cairo bazaar.
‘That is very charming,’ said Mrs. Lambourne, as the two ladies arranged their goods on the stall. ‘I have some girls coming to help in costume, but I am thankful to say it is optional for the elders.’

‘One grows accustomed to costumes,’ said Miss Nance cheerfully.

‘Yes, you must find so much moving about rather fatiguing; but I have heard praises of your undertaking on all sides. Times are changed since my son-in-law’s fancy for the stage so upset my dear husband and myself.’

‘We are complete in ourselves, you see,’ said Miss Nance, ‘which removes all objections. Does Mr. Lambourne ever act now?’

‘Sometimes; but he dislikes amateur performances, and never thinks them satisfactory. He is very critical on such matters.’

‘I am afraid he would think us very amateurish! I don’t agree with him. Professionals are never so fresh as good amateurs,’ said Miss Nance. ‘But Clarence Burnet, the rising young actor people talk of, is a connection, I think, of yours, isn’t he?’

‘Well, hardly of mine,’ said Mrs. Lambourne; ‘he is—connected certainly with my son-in-law’s family. He is extremely clever and likely to get on. And most respectable, and well-conducted,—Alaric, my son-in-law, thinks very highly of him. Of course there are excellent persons in every profession.’

If Miss Dorset had known the past history of the Lambourne family, she would have been aware that this speech represented an entire change of front, and a considerable conquest of past prejudice, on the part of the speaker; nor did she feel herself sufficiently ‘professional’ to range herself among the excellent
persons mentioned; but as it was, she thought the tone dry, and gathered that Mrs. Lambourne did not like the rising young actor. She was not called upon to reply, however, for a bright-faced lady, with a slight cleverly-managed suggestion of the East in her costume, came across from the opposite stall.

‘Your things look charming, Mrs. Lambourne; do introduce me to Miss Dorset. I’m commissioned to ask a favour of her.’

‘Mrs. Kingsbridge,’ said Mrs. Lambourne. ‘It is at her suggestion that we have added the dramatic element to the bazaar.’

‘Is it possible, Miss Dorset, that the “Wills o’ the Wisp” would assist other performers? Would any of you act with amateurs?’

‘Why—I don’t know why we should not, supposing we knew all about them. But my nephew is our leader. What is the proposal?’

‘Let me explain. That great place Hildon Castle, not far from here, has been taken by some people called Pettifer, enormously rich—I think they made their money in buttons; but we don’t mind that in these days. Well, partly to establish themselves, and partly because the young people wish it, they mean to give a fête on a most splendid scale next month. Their son comes of age. They provide everything in the most magnificent manner, and they want different entertainments for three nights. The young people and their friends are devoted to acting, but can’t do it all. They have set their hearts on “Romeo and Juliet.” That’s Miss Pettifer’s piece. I am afraid it’s very ambitious; but I hope they have really got Clarence Burnet for Romeo—I did that stroke of business for them. They want a nurse, Miss Dorset; and Mercutio,
and one or two other parts. Then the two other nights would be arranged for them by the professionals, only young Tom Pettifer, who is rather out of it in the tragedy, would like a part found for him. It would be a case of staying there for at least a week. Expense no object, everything done in the best style, and really a great introduction; for the whole world will be there. Do you think Sir Lewis would entertain the notion?'

'Why, it is very much the sort of thing he looks for,' said Miss Dorset. 'You had better ask him.'

'I don't know if Mr. Alaric Lambourne would give them a recitation?' continued Mrs. Kingsbridge, turning to Mrs. Lambourne.

'Really,' said that lady, 'I never can tell what he will do in such matters, and what he dislikes; but you can ask him, Mrs. Kingsbridge.'

At this moment a bell rang, and all the costumed stall-holders, with every one who could get up any sort of fancy dress, were summoned to form a grand procession to open the bazaar. They were headed by Sir Lewis Willingham as a herald, blowing a trumpet. Agnes and Juliet led a band of fair eastern maidens, with long tails of hair, and veils, not over their faces. Dolph was got up as a fool, with cap and bells, Selva as an Irish maiden, and a tall young man half way down the rank attitudinised conspicuously as Harlequin, and was pointed out as young Mr. Pettifer. This was the order of proceeding.

First of all the Rector of Homesworth stood up at the end of the room, made a little speech, and as the local paper afterwards put it 'offered up a prayer.' Then the Mayor declared the bazaar open. Then Sir Lewis blew his trumpet, and spouted, in much more
audible accents than the Mayor, a rhyming speech prepared for the occasion.

'Well, I'm glad they got the professional to do that,' said one of the eastern maidens. Agnes hung down her fair head as the procession moved on, while Juliet laughed triumphantly, though she whispered to Agnes—

'If I was one of the particular sort, I should dislike all this much more than the acting. I'd rather keep the prayers separate.'

Miss Nance usually took things for granted, and marched cheerfully round, thinking how popular the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' were becoming; but Mrs. Martin Lambourne apologised to her, and possibly to herself also, as the business of the bazaar began, with, 'You see, after all, it is not for a church; which makes a great difference.'

Bazaar and dramatic performances alike went off with spirit.

Sir Lewis and Lady Willingham were introduced to Mrs. Pettifer, a splendidly attired and showy lady, and made the engagement to act at Hildon Castle in the second week of August.

The 'Wills o' the Wisp' had crowded audiences, their names flared on all the walls of Homesworth, and tramped round the town on strings of sandwich men, and the next morning the two local papers came out with long notices of their performances. The Homesworth Guardian took the line of high compliment to 'these distinguished members of our county society,' praised everything uncritically and indiscriminately, the beauty and grace of the young ladies, and the genius of the gentlemen, and in short afforded them, what Juliet rather contemptuously called a succès d'estime.
The *Homesworth Mercury and Literary Chronicle* on the other hand, spoke of a company of amateurs who were endeavouring to gain a professional footing on the stage with some claims to success, criticised them impartially and not amiss, praised Sir Lewis as Tony Lumpkin; prophesying that he would soon acquire the necessary *aplomb*, said that Miss Dorset's Mrs. Hardcastle was clever, but not broad enough in effect for the size of the room; that Miss Juliet Willingham was arch and spirited, but did not know how to stand still; that Miss Agnes was stiff and inaudible, but that her striking figure and unusual beauty almost redeemed these defects; relegated Ernley Armytage and Rupert to the ranks of the merest tyros, and finally assured the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' that though they were far from unpromising, months of hard study were needed to cure their performance of its many incongruities, and to lift them to a professional level.

'I like this the best,' said Juliet sturdily; but to Agnes it brought the first note of that sound that must come roughly on a 'young lady's' ear, the public criticism of work for which she is paid. The praise hurt her as much as the blame. Miss Nance, Selva, and Ernley Armytage said the *Gazette* was a Radical paper, and of course opposed the *Guardian*.

Sir Lewis said little, but he looked graver than usual, and drilled his troupe more zealously than ever.
CHAPTER VII

HARRY TO THE RESCUE

'Look at this!' said the Reverend Harry Merrifield, launching himself into his cousin David's study, and sinking into a chair.

'Why, old fellow, you look quite pale,' exclaimed David, raising his face from his notes for his sermon. 'Has anything happened?'

'See! the force they must have put on her!'

'What's this—"Wills o' the Wisp"—beauty and grace—archness and charm?' said David, reading from the newspaper that his cousin had thrust over his volume of the 'Library of the Fathers.' 'Can't be the same, Hal—this is Juliet. She had a cousin Juliet, I know.'

'It is both of them,' groaned Harry. 'Look a little farther—it is the whole family of them.'

'Yes, I see,' said David, looking at the paper. 'These amateur theatricals are all the go!'

'My dear block of a David! you don't understand. Private theatricals are one thing, though the idea would drive your mother frantic, but this is a paid affair! They are laying themselves out for engagements.'

'How do you know?'

'Miss Peckham's nieces were at this bazaar and wrote to her about it. They call themselves "Wills
o' the Wisp," and go acting all round the country for money. So she trots up at once to the Canon's to find out if it is Miss Wharton's friend—and spread the pleasant intelligence.'

'Well, and is it?'

'No doubt of that—Sir Lewis Willingham and family—and what is worse, not one word had she written to Miss Wharton since just the first letter to say that she had got safe home! Poor girl, of course she knows what would be thought of it here.'

'Sir Lewis Willingham has been ruined by his Bank,' said David musingly.

'But he need not have brought his sister to the stage!'

'I should call it a pity, and it would horrify my mother and Susan; but, as you know, theatricals are common enough in these days, and it is a very different thing for a girl to make one of a company of relations and friends from going on the stage, as you put it.'

'You actually excuse it!'

'I do not judge without knowing the circumstances.'

'You may not, you old Solomon; but what would your folks, ay, and my uncle at Beechcroft, on whom so much depends, think of it? Why, the very notion of her displaying herself to these cads and being criticised by them is perfectly maddening!' and he marched up and down like a panther in a cage, while David bent down his head, and drew on his blotting-paper a pig with a cork-screw tail, as he always did when he was distressed, so that his sister Elizabeth was wont to say she could estimate the amount of parish worries by the number of swine in his blotting-book.

Presently Harry halted in front of him. 'I say, Vicar, you can get on without me till Saturday.'
'You are such a valuable article in your present frame of mind,' said David drily. 'What do you want to do?'

'To show her a way of deliverance.'

'What! Coalhamp smuts on £150 a year?'

'I have not a doubt in the world that the dear girl would prefer it.' David could not restrain a little shudder which crooked the pig's tail unnaturally; 'but I should not think of that,' he added, 'an engagement would answer the purpose just as well.'

David withheld the 'if' on his tongue, and Harry went on; 'I don't want to talk of it, but my Aunt Emily told me that Beechcroft Rectory may be looked on as a dead certainty as soon as old Osgood drops; or before, if his old Curate goes, for he has a great mind to resign, only they all begged him to go on that I might grow a little older, and see more of real work with you—indeed, I wouldn't have taken it then. It is £450 a year, and a little gem of a model parish, might go into a box.'

'And it is to be dangled before Miss Willingham as a reward.'

'David, what has come to you? As if the dear girl had any such thoughts; but it will do to hold out to her brother. If he is lost to everything else, it may tell upon him that Mr. Mohun would certainly not give the living to one who had figured as an actress—I mean whose wife had.'

'Perhaps not,' said the Vicar, compelled to answer. 'You understand this is only an engine for dealing with the brother, and showing him that I have some grounds. As to herself, I am absolutely certain that the whole thing is hateful to her, and that she will be thankful to have any excuse to her brother—a feather-
brained fellow. What tyranny he must have put on her! It makes me sick to think of what she must have gone through.'

'It is ten to one that she minds it as much as you imagine. I know she has acted before, and our family is—I am thankful to say—not very modern in its notions.'

'I know her better! It is bosh for you to talk, David. She abhors this publicity, and has been dragged into it by this absurd brother. You will see.'

'Well, I suppose you must go, Harry, only remember, it is a delicate business, and you had better take care how you manage it. Have you any plan? What do you mean to do?'

'There's a fellow gone as Curate to Ousehaven that I was at Cuddesdon with—Ripley his name is—I thought of going down to him.'

'Without writing to ask how it stands?'

'I couldn't! I must save her before they have committed her further.'

'Humph!'

Harry dashed upstairs to pack, and before David could settle to work again he drew a pig with a tail like the tendrils of a vine, and left off, first with a heavy sigh, then a firm compression of the lips.
CHAPTER VIII

A DRAMATIC INTERLUDE

Curates, in their capacity of masters of the revels, are not apt to be intolerant of theatricals that amuse their parishioners, and Sir Lewis Willingham had been regarded as a useful auxiliary in the promotion of innocent pleasures; but it was a very different thing when it came to the secession of two valuable parish workers, if not of three, leaving it very doubtful how their place could be adequately supplied.

And thus, when Harry Merrifield, after spending the night at the Railway Hotel, appeared before his friend, Mr. Ripley, at the early matins, and walked back to breakfast, he found the clerical world of Ousehaven in a state of wrath and indignation at their bereavement, and for such a cause, and indulging in considerable invectives against the stage-struck baronet, forgetting how they themselves had encouraged him as long as the audience consisted of their own parishioners.

To crown all, Agnes Willingham, whom Harry had hoped to have seen at church, was not there.

‘It was all of a piece,’ observed Mr. Ripley, ‘they were dropping everything, though the Vicaress did declare that she was crying all church time last Sunday.’

Agnes was not at church because the full worry
and fatigue of a flitting had been going on all the day before. An old friend had fortunately taken the house and furniture for a year, so that an entire break-up was avoided, and only personal properties were brought down to the Wharf House; but the toil was perhaps greater to the womenkind because their professional labour was not employed. Nor was the business over. The arranging was being carried on in full force—books being placed in their shelves, and tables, chairs, and pictures being disposed of whenever Lewis and Juliet would spare their victims from rehearsal.

Lewis had written a little tragi-comedy by way of afterpiece, in order at once to promote his cause politically, and to utilise his wife and Major O'Connor. It was under great difficulties, for whereas she came from Tipperary and the Major from Downe, whatever piece of brogue escaped one, was criticised by the other, and they only agreed in denouncing his hero as a mere conventional Irishman, and his bulls as quite impossible—and a perfect insult to the Green Isle.

However, it had got itself completed, and in a large room which the two aunts had long disused, Lewis was in the act of drilling his company.

Such of the *dramatis personae* as were not in the act of rehearsal, were attending to the infant Lewis, who insisted on crawling about the floor, and making attempts at eating the colours with which George Buckley and Agnes were endeavouring to paint the background of the old woman's hut—not their first attempt at scene painting—and where George gave authoritative directions, as one who really had some ability.

She had just been called upon to sing the song which was to go to the heart of Dolph, as a wild Irish
imp, creeping among the bushes to listen; when
James, the ancient butler, entered with exactly the
face of benevolent disgust with which he was wont to
regard these same young people's gambols twelve or
fourteen years previously.

He handed Agnes a card, saying, 'A reverend
gentleman to call upon Miss Willingham.'

'Preposterous! at this time of day,' cried Lewis.
'Tell him she is engaged.'

'Oh no! It is Mr. Harry Merrifield, from Coal-
ham; Alice Wharton must have sent some message.
I must see him,' cried Agnes.

'Confounded him!' muttered Lewis. 'Get rid of
him at once—you are due already.'

Agnes dashed off, intending a visit to her own room
to remove her painting apron, and what was worse, the
rouge with which Juliet had decorated her—partly to
tease her, partly to try the effect. Moreover, her
nephew had bedaubed her forehead with a great green
smear before the brush could be taken from his little
hands.

James, uncertain where, in the general confusion,
to bestow the reverend gentleman, had left him wait-
ing in the front hall, where he impetuously turned
upon Agnes with both hands held out, and such an
eager 'Miss Willingham' as to confuse her, as she
answered, 'My aunt will be glad to see you—this way,
please,' meaning to leave him with Aunt Marion, while
she made herself respectable, and intending that lady
to ask him to luncheon.

'Onemoment, onemoment first,' he said, and she found
that a tête-à-tête was inevitable, and knowing that there
were housemaids in the drawing-room, upholsterers in
the study, and carpenters in the dining-room, she
could only lead the way to the lobby door opening into the sloping terraced garden, the river below glaring in the noontide sun of a very hot day. 'I hope they are all well at Coalham?'

'Quite—quite, only very sorry—much concerned about this,' said he, as he looked at her.

She had managed, while seizing a Zulu hat, to divest herself of the apron, but she had forgotten the colouring on her face, which to his eyes was like a soil on the pure complexion.

'About what?' she said, expecting to hear of some parish disaster.

'This—this scheme—that you should be compelled to—that there should be this undertaking—that your brother,' he answered, breaking off sentences and stammering as her eyes opened wider on him.

For it is a very different thing to regret a brother's proceedings, and to hear them censured by a stranger, and in spite of all Agnes's misgivings, the sound of blame immediately put her on the defensive for Lewis's sake, and she coldly answered, 'My brother quite understands what he is about!'

'I am sure it must be most unpleasant to you,' exclaimed Harry.

'We have been used to acting all our lives,' was the answer, taking him greatly aback, for he had fully expected her to admit that she disliked the enterprise, whereas there was not even a tone of excuse.

'Surely,' he said, after a pause, 'you have been drawn into making a great sacrifice of your own feelings and of your usefulness here.'

'One duty must give way to another,' said Agnes, perceiving, not without annoyance, that her defection had been discussed among the curates.
‘You call this duty!’ he exclaimed.
‘Of that I must judge for myself,’ said she, with dignity.
‘You mean,’ he said, ‘that, as I was convinced, family feeling has forced you into consenting to what must be utterly repugnant to one like you.’ And while she was opening her lips to disclaim compulsion, he hurried on, ‘As soon as I knew it, I started off; I don’t know whether you perceived my feelings towards you, I tried to keep them back, for I knew I should not have dared to speak them out till I was in a position to do so—in the position almost certain. Only now it might be a rescue.’

Agnes, utterly amazed and almost affronted, had only gone as far as, ‘I never thought of this,’ when he dashed on, almost stuttering in his eagerness, ‘If only you would give me hopes, then there would be a great reason for standing out against it.’

‘Indeed!’

The tone stung the poor young fellow, and he cried, ‘O Agnes—I beg your pardon, Miss Willingham—can you not care for me a little? Have you never guessed that my whole heart is yours, though I kept it to myself till I thought the avowal might help you back to the higher life.’

‘Thank you, I am much obliged to you,’ said Agnes, very stiffly.
‘Oh!’ the poor fellow exclaimed, ‘have I offended? Forgive me.’
‘I know you meant it kindly,’ said Agnes, turning towards the house, but with more gentleness of tone.
‘Only say you will think it over!’ he implored; ‘you cannot think this is the way to real happiness.’
‘That is my affair,’ said she, the family loyalty
coming to the surface again, and resenting his right to criticise.

'Oh I see,' he muttered, not seeing at all. 'Well, at least say you forgive.'

'I have nothing to forgive, and there is no more to be said. I am wanted. Good morning.'

She held out her hand for the parting shake, but the very touch inspired him to hold it fast, and begin an incoherent fresh pleading. At that moment Lewis broke into the midst of a brilliant flirtation between the maid and the ruffian, with 'Murder, if the fellow is not proposing to her.' Selva, who was prompting, thought it was in his character of policeman, but he pointed to the window, and strode to the door.

'Don't be spoiling sport, my boy,' remonstrated the Major, while Selva and Aunt Anne shrieked, 'Don't, Lewis! what are you about?'

'She wants to get rid of him, that's plain,' added Juliet, who had flown to the window.

'There!' added the Major, 'you should study her, Juliet. She never struck such a fine tragedy-queen attitude as that, when she was bound to do it on the stage. Ah! there's Lewis come out! Indignant father—eh?'

George Buckley rushed also to the window, and stared eagerly out of it, while Selva cried—

'Come away! Don't! How can you stand and stare, Juliet?'

'She has escaped now,' said the Major. 'Exit majestically, and left him to the fraternal wrath. He is a personable young black-coat enough.'

'Decidedly a handsome boy,' added Aunt Anne, who, now that Agnes had retreated, had no scruples. 'Poor lad, he is catching it.'
Poor Harry, all unconscious of the eyes fixed upon him, was, with all his inexperienced incoherency, trying to plead his cause with the brother, but only able to recollect fragments of the representations he had prepared in case Agnes accepted him.

'Indeed, I know it appears very presumptuous, but I could not help it, I could not see such a girl as your sister—No, that's not what I mean. But, indeed, I did not come without prospects, though I would have waited, only that she is so much too good for this sort of thing—You see,' hurrying on, as he saw Lewis's look of displeasure, 'I have prospects, indeed, I have; my uncle, Mr. Mohun of Beechcroft, has as good as promised me the living—four hundred and fifty a year. Only these public theatricals would be a bar with them! Old-world prejudice, you think,' as the face became more scornful and angry, but standing to his colours, 'but I fully agree. My mother would never let my sisters. And from what I have seen of Miss Willingham, I cannot but believe this is distasteful to her, and, in short, that if she would only—only——' here he faltered, so that Lewis broke his ominous silence.

'You thought this tempting possibility might be an inducement to her to break up her family arrangements, and to put a stigma on them. My sister is extremely obliged to you, but she would on no account wish you to endanger your prospects for her sake. Good morning to you.'

Wherewith, having got him near the hall door, Sir Lewis bowed him out with all the superiority of thirty-two over twenty-five helplessly conscious of making a fool of itself, and of having put forward a really good cause in the most insulting manner possible.
Sir Lewis, on the contrary, walked back laughing, and entered saying, 'Four hundred pounds and possibilities! There's cheek in a little whipper-snapper parson. Indeed, the four hundred is the possibility, the hope of which is to bribe me to deliver up Agnes out of our wicked theatricals, and keep her waiting for his Reverence on pain of offending the old fogey of a patron. It's a perfect comedy!'

'What does Agnes say?' asked Juliet anxiously.

'Agnes? Oh! she has far too much sense. Are you taking the boy upstairs, Selva? I wish you would call her. We could finish the singing scene before luncheon. Dolph!'

But Aunt Anne had discreetly cleared off herself, the Major, George Buckley, and Dolph; while Selva, suspecting that Agnes might not take things as lightly as Lewis expected, after depositing her son, made her way to her sister-in-law's room, and opened with a brief knocking.

Agnes was, as she expected, in tears, but shedding them most reluctantly, trying to choke them back and sponge them off, and she turned, hurt at first at the intrusion, then in a moment softened by Selva's sweet affectionate face and voice, 'My poor, dear Nestie! Was it very horrid?'

'O Selva, I was such a wretch; I said just what I ought not,' and she gave up the struggle and sobbed.

'My dear, dear Nestie, do you like him; didn't you want Lewis to send him away?'

'Oh, it's not that! At least it was too hard on him! I know how he meant it, and what they must all think at Coalham; but he made me so angry, I didn't know what I was saying.'

'Angry. how?'
'What he said about Lewis.'
'About Lewis,' cried Selva fiercely.
'Never mind, Selva dear, only he thought Lewis had made me—forced me into this, and that it is not nice.'
'An impertinent prig of a curate,' exclaimed Selva.
'What business is it of his. I hope you gave it him well.'
'Don't, don't, Selva. It is all his goodness.'
'I hate such goodness! Sticking up to be better than other people, like a sanctimonious peacock! Lewis always hated your running after all those parsons at Coalham, and now you see that he was right.'
'No, no, you don't understand,' with a fresh burst of tears.
'Don't cry so, don't,' entreated soft-hearted Selva, with an arm round her. 'If you really like him, and he is a fine-looking youth, and he likes you, it is easy getting over a trifle of a tiff like that, and we'll get round Lewis.' And as Agnes uttered faint noes, she resumed: 'Oh yes, and if you don't like him it's just as bad, the doing it, I mean. I know what that is! I cried buckets full enough to fill the lough about poor Mr. Darcy, yet I wouldn't have had him, not to be Queen of Connaught. Never mind, they get over it fast enough; why, before a month was over, he was engaged to that great bouncing Ellen O'Meara. It is a horrid business, whether one likes them or not. If only one could have one's fun without its coming to all that stuff and nonsense of proposals. Darling Agnes, do only tell me what you would like.'
'Selva, dear, you are very good, but I am afraid that what I wish most is to be let alone a little while
before luncheon; I shall be all right then, and please don't let anybody say one word more about it.’

Selva was wise enough to accept her dismissal with a parting caress, and she gave it as her opinion to her family that ‘Agnes cared for the young parson at the bottom, only he had taken her by the wrong end.’

By that evening’s post arrived a letter, written by Alice Wharton in the tumult of incredulous displeasure, excited by the gossip which had so stirred Harry Merrifield. She was sure there was some horrible exaggeration, it was quite impossible that Agnes should think of anything so dreadful. For, in truth, Alice’s ideas of a stage life were of the crudest and narrowest, and her only modern experience theretofore was of a young dressmaker who had been absorbed by a disreputable music-hall. So her letter was of the most unsparing character, such as none of her elders would have advised her to send.

Agnes, however, naturally took it as family opinion, and, hurt and wounded, as well as too proud for self-vindication, returned these brief lines—

‘Dear Alice—It is true. If such be your opinion, I can say no more; yet perhaps you would not judge us so hardly if you knew all. You will hardly let me still call myself

‘Your loving Agnes.’
CHAPTER IX

'YOUNG MAN, I THINK YOU'RE DYING'

The Coalham clergy having been unable to prevent the schools from falling under a Board, endeavoured to give definite Church teaching on the Saturdays, and Mr. David Merrifield had a double class gathered round him in his mission room, while a couple of hard-working ladies were engaged, each with a party of children at the other two corners. The sun, in spite of the grimy atmosphere, beat hotly on the iron structure, casting a sickly light on the crimson curtains that veiled the chancel portion, and making the children languid and inattentive.

Their Vicar was not sorry when the door opened and his Curate strode in to relieve him of at least half his scholars. He could not but look up inquiringly to the face that flushed under his eye, but not with the flush of happy exulting embarrassment, while the dark eyes fell beneath his.

He went on while the second class moved to its place; and looked again presently. Then he saw the cheeks that had been so red, white and almost sunken, swollen eyelids, great dark rings below them, and he detected a shiver; certainly the voice had a strange unnatural sound, as with vehemence and eloquence the Curate dilated on the insidious deterioration of nature.
produced by the pomps and vanities of this wicked world.

David felt uneasy. He had scarcely expected that great success would attend Harry, and he had a sharp sting of self-reproach for the sense that he was not sorry; but the broken, exhausted look startled him, and he went on mechanically with his own boys, trying to judge of the feverish energy of Harry's teaching.

At the break-up he was delayed, and did not reach home for a quarter of an hour. He had a small tenement, a remnant of Coalham's obscure days, solid and quaint, and the pink of tidiness, between himself, his Curate, and his housekeeper.

Before her kitchen fire, on that sultry July day, Harry was discovered endeavouring to warm himself, and refusing the perennial broth which she was heating for him.

"Yes sir," she began, as soon as her master had found his way to the scene of action, guided by her voice; 'he did ought to go to his bed at once, and I'll turn it down in one minute. To think of what you young gentlemen will do, as is downright sinful. He owns to it, sir, he got himself wet to the skin in that there thunderstorm—asleep under a tree—and a mercy he ain't a corpse.'

David could not and would not ask any questions, and only stood over the poor youth while he swallowed his soup, and thereby seemed warmed into energy enough to walk upstairs; though with the perversity of human nature, he would not hear of going to bed, but dozed in the wicker chair, while the sound of his breathing distracted David's study for his sermon. When at length he woke, the need of utterance was upon him. First there was a heavy choking sigh, and
on a word from David, he said—'There! you see it is all up.'

'I saw that plain enough,' said David kindly. 'But what have you been doing to yourself?'

'It is all over, the whole dream,' said Harry. 'Nothing is left but my calling. That shall engross my whole man, as it ought to have always done; but oh! she seemed—oh! the pity of it, David.'

David made an inarticulate sound of inquiry.

'Bent upon it,' said Harry. 'Would not hear a single word of remonstrance! Utterly changed,' and with responses of grunts from David, who was drawing pigs all the time, he related his unfortunate interviews with Miss Willingham and her brother, and how she would not listen, and Sir Lewis insulted him. 'A wretched family influence,' he said, 'destroying the sweetest, noblest of natures.'

'Don't be an ass,' said David gruffly; 'you need not talk as if there were anything wicked in a girl simply doing what her brother tells her, and going about with him and his wife. If you took her in that way, no wonder she had nothing to say to you.'

'You don't approve, David?'

'I—no! but it is folly to exaggerate. There's no positive harm in the thing, guarded as she is, and you may depend on it she hates it all the time.'

'I thought so once,' said Harry disconsolately; 'but there's no hope of that. She said she had been used to it all her life.'

'Then the less harm in it. Why, Hal, you go on just as if one of your sisters had run away with a circus. I see now. You think they insulted you. I have no doubt they think you insulted them.'

A groan was the only reply.
'Cheer up, old man. You have put your foot in it now, but if she is the real good girl I firmly believe she is, it won't hurt her, and things will come round; see if they don't. Only what have you been doing to yourself in the meantime? What's this about going to sleep in a thunderstorm?'

'It wasn't a thunderstorm when I fell asleep.'

'How came you to be in it?'

Harry explained briefly how, unable to face his friend, he had taken up his bag at the hotel, but found that an available train would not start for two hours, and had resolved to spend the time in the fields beyond the town, and tramped off on the green banks that sloped downwards to the river.

On he went, but it was a very heavy sultry day; he had slept little the last two nights, and agitation and rapid walking soon wore him out; and at a mile from the station, while crossing a pasture-field, the impulse of weariness was so strong that he threw himself down under a tree to think over the situation, and presently was sound asleep; so soundly that he was only wakened at last by hail falling upon his neck, to hear thunder growling overhead, and feel rain pouring down on him, while his watch told him that he would scarcely be in time for the train at his utmost speed of walking; and when he at last arrived, breathless, limp, and dripping, it was to find that in a few minutes a very stopping excursion train would start, and Harry launched himself into a crowded and stuffy carriage. The windows were closed against the rain, the crowded space reeked with the fumes of spirits, tobacco, wet clothes, and the monster described by the Board school boy as a Carbonicide. Thence he had emerged for a miserable waiting at a London station
in the chill of dawn, before he could make his way to Coalham.

David got him to bed as soon as possible, and in the morning drove him back thither, and brought in the Mother of the nursing sisterhood. She took the patient in hand, while his Vicar sent to Canon Wharton to borrow the Rev. Richard Burnet, the next youngest Curate, who was endowed with the finest voice, and most fluent and flowery tongue in Coalham, though it sometimes confused its metaphors. Out of Church he was most hard-working and excellent, but very stiff, and indefinably not quite a gentleman, as David felt when he was somewhat over inquisitive as to the cause of the expedition and the illness.

When David could pause in the midst of his hurried Sunday, he found that the Mother thought so seriously of his curate as to advise calling in the doctor, and the upshot of their consultation was that pneumonia was setting in, and the real mother had better be sent for.

Thus, in due time, Lady Merrifield and the old family nurse, Mrs. Halfpenny, were at the bedside of the patient, who was just capable of feeling the comfort of their presence, though too ill for anything else.

It was not till the evening of the following day that David had any conversation with his aunt, a tall, graceful, sweet-faced woman, still more than handsome, though gray-haired and showing the effects of her day of travelling and night of anxious watching. She had left Harry to Mrs. Halfpenny, the authority of his nursery days, and was partaking of a meal between dinner, tea, and supper.

'Now, David, I want to know the meaning of all this.'

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'Yes, Aunt Lily,' said the Vicar, diligently picking the bone of his cutlet.

'I am sure it is from no want of care on your part,' she said kindly; 'but I do want to understand where he was coming from that night.'

'From Ousehaven,' said David, as if he were in the witness-box.

'What—in Suffolk?'

'Yes.'

'What could he have been doing there? I can't understand him, dear boy, and I don't know how much is delirium. I don't like to excite him, and I really can't answer him without knowing more. He goes on muttering about Agnes, as if he were pleading, and then he moans about "thrown away, and smirched." Has the dear boy been deceived in any one? The doctor said that this journey and wetting had evidently done so much harm in consequence of a great shock, and he looked as if he knew what it was.'

'Gossip!' groaned David. 'No, Aunt Lily, he has not been deceived; she is as good a girl as ever lived!'

'Is it the Miss Willingham he has mentioned as staying at Canon Wharton's? Is she not the daughter of Sir Lewis, a colonel of artillery, whom your uncle knew?'

'Exactly. He got into some banking business at Ousehaven, and on his death his affairs proved to be in great confusion. The brother has made them all take to acting, in a semi-amateur fashion. That is all!'

'All! It is not nice for the sisters!'

'No; but much depends on how people see things. His wife goes with him, and I believe the company is all made up of old friends.'
'That is better; but——'

'Of course, it is not desirable, and Harry naturally took it to heart, and thought that an engagement to him would serve her as a sufficient reason for giving up what she did not like. He found himself mistaken! That's all!'

David moved to ring the bell, as one relieved by an excuse for interruption. Lady Merrifield exclaimed——

'Dear boy! No wonder he feels it; but it is an escape!' she said, in a sort of resentment at what seemed want of sympathy. Then, 'And had this horrid girl played with him——given him reason to expect——'

'Don't ask me, Aunt Lily. I was a great deal too busy to be up at the Rectory. But I distinctly assure you that she is not a horrid girl! She is as nice and right-minded a girl as ever lived; and you may be quite sure that she has only gone into this because she could not resist family force when there is no moral wrong.'

'I daresay she was very charming here,' said Lady Merrifield, amused at such defence from one of the Stokesley family, always more strait-laced than her own, and thinking this a proof of how the very steadiest and soberest head could be bewitched. So she went back to her watch, by no means disposed to dissent from Mrs. Halfpenny's conclusion that 'the puir laddie had been misgugglit by some silly tawpie; and, mind you, my leddy, when they have it so sair in their health they get ower it brawly a' the suner!'

It was sair enough in health, certainly, though the danger was never so acute as to make it expedient to
summon Sir Jasper. The inflammation subsided, and Harry's brain became clear and his tongue therewith reticent, though his eyes looked very sad, and his abortive sighs were not altogether due to physical oppression. It was gradually that the old habit of childhood, and the comfort of his mother's presence, with the craving for her sweet sympathy, brought out what lay so heavy on his heart.

'She was so good; she had such noble aspirations. If I could only have dared to take her to myself and shield her before all this!'

'Ah! but that might have been the worse for you.'

'Oh no! I am sure it was all true and genuine. You should have seen her countenance——'

'I have no doubt that she felt it all at the time, my dear; but young girls are so dependent on their surroundings that it is very difficult to judge them.'

Poor Harry reiterated that she was what he had thought her, and began again on the pity of it that she should be led away into frivolity, to become the gazingstock of cads, the theme of penny-a-liners, and be utterly changed.

'It is a sad thing,' owned his mother; but a sense of justice led her to add, 'Still you must remember that she must consider her family. She may be going quite against her own instincts and tastes to gratify her brother.'

'That most insolent fellow!' sighed Harry. 'I was sure of it till I saw her, mother! I thought she would have caught at the loop-hole of escape from this compulsion; but I saw in a moment how entirely her whole character had been changed, and she had been infected with the family scorn of the clergy, and
eagerness for frivolity and flattery. She only tried to get away, and the brother insulted me.'

'It is a terrible shock, indeed!' said his mother, only able to soothe him at the moment, and perfectly convinced that at this grievous cost he had had a great escape. By birth and marriage alike belonging to old county families who might be poor, but never speculative, she was inclined to take a disadvantageous view of failure in money matters, as evidence against the family, and though she could candidly grant that such acting as that of Miss Willingham was not exactly like going on the stage, it was what she would have shuddered at for her own daughters, and would have found it difficult to condone in a future daughter-in-law; and she could not fail to resent the acuteness of her son's smart, while he continued to pour out his grief into the ever-ready, sympathising motherly ear.

'Only, Harry,' she said, 'you could hardly expect her family to consent to an indefinite engagement, with no means worth speaking of.'

'I knew that. I told him I was all but sure of Beechcroft, only that my uncle would not tolerate her having been on the stage.'

'You did? Surely, Harry, you are not reckoning on that! Who told you so?'

'I think it was Aunt Emily.'

'Did you not know that your uncle was very much impressed by David, and when old Mr. Osgood talked of resigning, four years ago, offered it to him? Indeed, Mr. Osgood would resign to-morrow if David would give up his work here and take it.'

'Old Davy? Why, mother, I went and told him what I expected, and he never said a word to the contrary; I see—I see, the good old fellow. He would
have backed out of it and spoken for me. O mother!'

'Well, it was an unlucky bit of gossip from your aunt, for your Uncle William talked it over with your father and me, and said he not only thought you too young, but he doubted about the expediency of the squire and clergyman being so nearly related as you would be to himself or Claude; so you might have been in an awkward position.'

'If ever I will believe Aunt Emily again!' exclaimed Harry, with a fierceness which choked him.

And his mother, as soon as she was free to think of anything save his physical condition, perceived something of the renunciation that must have been her nephew's—for she had little doubt that David had been likewise smitten, and that when he saw Harry go off on what had proved a wildgoose chase he contemplated the sacrifice alike of the lady and of the preferment that would have put her within his reach. She looked at David's imperturbable countenance with the greater honour and gratitude, though she durst not give a hint of her discovery, and thought the result a good thing for him as well as for Harry.

For Harry was rising out of his dejection with an increased fervour for the work of his calling. The poem in the Christian Year for the First Sunday after Easter was one of his chief solaces, and he was bent on devoting himself to the utmost, so that there were moments when he felt prone to take a vow of celibacy, and was chiefly withheld by the sense that David would say, 'Don't be an ass,' and his father be more displeased than he could reconcile with his regard to the Fifth Commandment.

But to his great mortification he was absolutely
forbidden to resume his duties at Coalham for many
weeks to come. He shrank from going home to be
under the eyes of all his sisters; and his mother, after
some deliberation, carried him off to vegetate for the
present at Brighton, with an aunt whom the family
regarded as a sort of down pillow.
CHAPTER X

PROFESSIONALS

On the Saturday afternoon on which all the purveyors of the dramatic entertainment were to arrive at Hildon Castle, Clarence Burnet sat in the train that was to take him there, reading a letter, just received from Sir Lewis Willingham, as to the proposed performance.

The successful and rising young actor knew that he had undertaken a tiresome and ungrateful task enough in drilling so mixed a company; but he was under early obligations to Mrs. Kingsbridge, at whose request he had accepted the engagement, and, being a punctilious person, he chose to discharge them in this way. He liked too to gain experience of various parts, and the uncle who was his patron, and now his employer, liked it for him.

Mr. Belville, as this uncle called himself professionally, was an actor of long standing, who had had influence enough with his managers to obtain engagements from them for so promising a beginner as Clarence Burnet. Now that Mr. Belville had himself become lessee and manager of the Planet Theatre, at which he had so long acted, his nephew’s position and prospects were greatly improved, and the superior and high-class melodrama, with which the theatre was to re-open in the late autumn, had been constructed on
purpose to supply him with a part suited to the powers which the uncle had the wit to see were great. As, however, it was now closed for repairs and alterations, he had some weeks of freedom, and he might as well play Romeo and Jacques, and practise stage-management when he had a chance, and—see if that bright-faced girl who had asked him so many questions at Rowhurst Rectory knew what acting meant. If so, she would be worth training.

With these thoughts a peculiar flashing smile passed over the young actor's marked powerful features—smooth-shaven after the manner of his profession—and lighted up his conspicuously black and deep-set eyes, even as he roused himself, with a shrug of his shoulders, and set himself steadily to the consideration of Sir Lewis Willingham's letter.

'H'm—will play Mercutio with pleasure—thinks part will suit him. Many fellows do. Got an Irish piece of his own, as to which he'll be glad of hints for the staging and mounting. H'm! Has been rehearsing the forest scenes in "As You Like It," for out of doors. Miss Juliet Willingham the Rosalind—ambitious!—plays Touchstone himself; Mr. Pettifer for Orlando—wants a Jacques. Could supplement the Irish piece with "Sheep in Wolf's Clothing." Do I think that this programme will be sufficient? Well, I should rather say it might be; but unless the Irish piece is very light comedy indeed, it strikes me as a trifle high pitched. However, as the old Sir Gorgias Midas says that he wishes to have Shakespeare, even if it comes more expensive, I suppose that is what is wanted.'

Here the train stopped at a junction, and Clarence caught sight on the platform of the party of whom he
was thinking, and as he looked out of the window a clear voice exclaimed—

'Here's our train—that's Mr. Burnet!' and Juliet Willingham smiled radiantly up at him under her broad straw hat, with the frankest of greetings.

Clarence sprang out, bowed, and helped in the ladies and their belongings as Sir Lewis made hurried introduction of his party, while Lady Willingham cried out—

'Oh, the long box with the masks, and the dynamite, and the muskets! They'll be for leaving it behind; let me get out and see.'

'Be quiet, Selva, do; you'll be left behind yourself;' said Rupert, while Dolph rushed up—

'All right, my lady; the dynamite went in first and the nine other boxes on the top.'

Then, as an old lady near turned round with a face of horror, he grinned, touched his cap again, and said confidentially—

'Don't be alarmed, mum, it's only theatrical,' as he jumped into the next carriage and the train went off.

'That's our odd boy and our brightest genius,' said Sir Lewis, as Clarence joined in the general laugh.

'I hoped we should meet, Mr. Burnet, and talk over matters a little. Let us count up our cast for 'Romeo and Juliet.' This is how I have arranged it with Mr. Pettifer by letter. Yourself, Romeo; Miss Pettifer, Juliet; my aunt, the Nurse; I, Mercutio; young Pettifer, Tybalt; my brother, Paris; Mr. Buckley, Capulet. Then you were to provide the Friar.'

'Yes; a man I know called Carter—a very fair actor,' said Clarence. 'He has been playing at the Ripley Theatre, and will join us at Hildon. Then, as I understand, a Mr. Lennox is their Benvolio?'
'Yes, a nephew of Lord Lassington; said to be a good man and experienced. My boy, Dolph, for the boy and Peter, and the smaller parts, these names here; and some young lady, Lady Capulet. All next week for preparation; dress rehearsal Monday, 18th, and three days' performance afterwards. All the scenery and properties, scene-shifters, etc., from the Ripley Theatre; costumes and man to make up, from London.'

'And the other pieces?'

'“As You Like It,” out of doors as done by the Pastoral Players. My cousin has been studying Rosalind; my sister, Celia, and Vincent Pettifer is to be Orlando. Lady Willingham plays Audrey; I, Touchstone; the other parts seem to be cast appropriately. Here they are, on this paper. This is the cast of my piece. And in the “Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,” which is quite our own piece, my sister takes Anne Carew, and Mr. Armytage, Jasper; and Colonel Kirke is a favourite part of Mr. Lennox's. I am Kester. We have never before played except with our own company; but we shall be very glad to profit by your longer experience.'

'Thank you, Sir Lewis,' said Clarence politely.

As he glanced round the carriage full of performers Juliet looked at him with another frank friendly smile.

'I did not think I should ever act with you, Mr. Burnet, when we met at Rowhurst,' she said. 'I am so glad, because I hope you will teach me.'

Clarence felt a little dazzled and confused, even while he noted the peculiarly clear note of her voice, audible through all the noise of the train, as he answered gravely—

'I have no experience of teaching, except what one
gains by having been carefully taught; but—I think we shall all have to work very hard to carry out such a heavy programme.'

'Well, we have a whole week,' said Miss Dorset.

And Clarence hoped the 'Wills o' the Wisp' knew what getting up heavy parts meant.

In due course they arrived at their destination, a little way-side station, from which various vehicles conveyed them all to Hildon Castle, where they found the house-party drinking tea in a gay red-and-white tent on the lawn, in front of an old gray house—a really fine building, with a ruined tower at one side of it, and three vast cedars casting solemn shadows across the velvet turf and dazzling flower-beds.

'Well, so you're all assembled,' said the host, a stout, cheerful, elderly gentleman, as he looked round the new arrivals after the introductions had been exchanged and tea handed round. 'And remember that 'ere there's nothing grudged you. When my son and Miss Pettifer, my daughter, took up this fashionable craze of stage-playing I said, "Well, do it, my dears, but do it in the best way. If you get professionals, get good ones; I'll pay the piper, so order what you like and do as you please so long as you entertain my company. I'm very glad to see you.'

The faces of Ernley Armytage and Rupert Willingham, as they stood at the tent door during this speech, might have made their fortunes as comedy actors. Sir Lewis was struck dumb, but Selva, her Irish eyes twinkling, said meekly—

'We'll do our best, Mr. Pettifer.'

Here Lewis caught sight of Dolph in the entrance of the tent receiving a cup of tea from the grand footman, which, perhaps under the impression that he was
being entertained as at a school-feast, he took with a polite 'Thank you, sir.'

'Oh,' said Lewis, 'perhaps your servants will be kind enough to take charge of my boy, and show him where to go until he is wanted for rehearsal.'

'Why,' exclaimed Mrs. Pettifer in a loud aside, 'I understood all the professionals were to be treated alike and have their meals with us!'

'Oh, hush, mother!' replied her daughter. 'You don't understand.'

Apparently the footman did, for Dolph vanished in his wake. Mr. Lennox, the experienced amateur, a youngish man with a florid complexion, laughed rather more visibly than was polite either to the 'professionals' or their entertainers; Mr. Carter, the other actor, who had arrived before them, bristled up, and Clarence Burnet stood looking at his tea-cup without betraying by one quiver of his black eyelashes how keenly he was observing the 'by play' of all concerned.

Miss Maud Pettifer, who was a pretty girl with languishing dark eyes and what she called 'an art-frock' in Liberty silk, cast many glances at him, and finally whispered to Juliet and Agnes, to whom she was by way of being very polite—

'That's my Romeo. He looks the part, doesn't he? Oh, I'm so nervous! I know I shall giggle when he begins to make love—wouldn't you? But there, of course you're never nervous, being so used to it.'

'The best way to prevent being nervous is to throw one's self into one's part,' said Juliet judiciously.

'Oh yes; I am always carried away. Oh, I want to be really professional if mother and dad will consent; dad could pay anything, you know, to give me a
chance. I want to come out at the Planet. I say, your brother's really a baronet, isn't he?

'Yes,' said Agnes, so blankly amazed that her voice conveyed no expression whatever.

'Because dad thought it was only put on the play bills, but I said it was a real title and that he was reduced to penury. So grand of him! It's like a play. But what's money to art? Acting is my vocation.'

Juliet endured that most aggravating of all spectacles—a caricature of her own enthusiasm, and would have liked to say that she hated acting; but, perhaps fortunately, a move was now made, and the visitors were taken indoors and shown up a grand staircase and along various corridors to their respective bedrooms. Agnes and Juliet were close together, and as soon as they were alone Juliet threw herself into a chair and indulged in an explosion of laughing.

'I never saw such odious people in my life,' said Agnes, tossing off her hat with more display of temper than she often allowed herself.

'Oh,' said Juliet, 'it's all in the day's work. But I never—never saw anything like Lewis's face. No, not even when the clergy-boy broke in upon the rehearsal and denounced the stage.'

'You need not refer to that, Jetty,' said Agnes.

Juliet faced round upon her and said seriously—

'Now look here, Agnes, if you're in love with that young man you had much better say so bravely to Lewis and give all this up; because, if you mean to marry him, you had better accommodate yourself to his prejudices first. In that case I'll stand by you; but, otherwise, you ought to laugh him to scorn.'

'You don't seem to think that friendship can count for anything, Jetty.'
'Friendship? For the clergy-boy?'
'No—no: for Miss Merrifield, for all of them. And, indeed, Jetty, I am not setting myself up, but it does seem to me that we're sacrificing everything—to mere frivolity.'
'I never felt less frivolous in my life,' said Juliet; 'it depends how you take it. But why don’t you write to Miss Merrifield and tell her all about it? If she’s worth anything she’ll understand. What else is a friend good for?'
'I don’t like to write about Lewis and all of you, even to her,' said Agnes. 'And besides——'
'That’s a very beautiful sentiment,' said Juliet; 'but, after all, it wouldn’t hurt us, and I like to have things out. If I had a romantic friend, or a lover either, I’d never go in for a misunderstanding; it’s too silly.'
'But you see, Jetty, you haven’t got a lover,' said Agnes, half-laughing.
'No, my lover is Romeo. Dear me, what a mercy Miss Pettifer didn’t hear me say that! She would think I meant Clarence Burnet. I’m sure, Agnes, you can’t say he looks frivolous.'
'No; but—— You see, Juliet, things do develop so. It was to be all among ourselves, and now here we are mixed up with strangers and professionals.'
'Yes,' said Juliet, gravely, 'things do develop; I quite see it. But now, Nestie, my dear sweet Nestie, since we are here, and we have to do it, do make the most of yourself; and when you’re acting Anne Carew, in which you look perfectly lovely, do try and flirt a little more flirtily with the wicked Colonel; and do remember that Jasper isn’t a saucy clergy-boy, but your own dear husband, and do fling yourself right
into his arms as if you meant it. Ernley Armytage won't think anything of it; I'm sure he won't. He's just a dear old giant.'

Agnes had had more experience than Juliet. The instinct that told her that Ernley Armytage certainly would think something of it was one of her chief difficulties. She discreetly answered, 'I'll do my best, Jetty,' unable to help owning that Juliet was certainly acquiring a sort of purpose that was not frivolous. The idea of a real confidence to so wise a person as Miss Merrifield attracted her; but Harry stood like a lion in the path, to say nothing of Miss Wharton's letter, and the thought of the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, which somehow pained her more than all.
CHAPTER XI

LIONS IN THE PATH

After a very grand dinner, in a great dining-room like a banqueting hall, Vincent Pettifer observed that they had plenty of work before them, and that they had better go to the theatre and put 'Romeo and Juliet' into shape. The stage was erected in a large ballroom, recently added to the house, and was everything that the performers could wish.

'Now then, Mr. Burnet,' said the young host, 'I suppose we're all under your orders for the occasion. Not but what we've got it all pretty pat already. Let's begin. Ladies won't object, of course, to cigarettes. Will you have one yourself, Miss Juliet—that's your name, isn't it? No? You don't smoke—we'll teach you. And here's plenty of champagne and claret-cup to help us through, whisky and seltzer also. Help yourselves, gentlemen, and don't forget the young ladies.'

Clarence Burnet declined these refreshments, and in a brief and business-like manner indicated the places to be assumed by the actors. Mr. Lennox, who had been previously acting as coach, played with some spirit, while Mr. Pettifer and the other members of his company murdered the blank verse with more or less skill. When Rupert appeared as Paris, he cast an appealing glance at the stage-manager.
‘I say, Mr. Burnet,’ he said, ‘one thing before I begin. At the end, I needn’t pretend to cry for Juliet, need I? *Restrained* emotion is the correct thing, isn’t it?’

‘Why, hadn’t we better leave that till we come to it?’ said Clarence. ‘Perhaps you might cover your face,’ and he dropped his head upon his arm for a moment, with a gesture, that so given, indicated despairing grief, but which, in Rupert’s imitation, had the effect of the ‘Oh, please sir, don’t sir, it wasn’t me, sir!’ of a school-boy caught throwing stones.

‘Get on, Rupert,’ said Lewis, ‘we’re all waiting for you.’

When Romeo himself began, Juliet and Sir Lewis prepared to watch with all their eyes and ears, to experience a blank sense of disappointment as Clarence, anxious to lose no time and after the manner of a professional rehearsal, rattled off his first long speech half-inaudibly and without an atom of expression, ending with Benvolio’s cue, spoken loudly and distinctly, ‘Dost thou not laugh?’

Benvolio, amazed in spite of his experience, and having by no means followed the words, was unequal to replying that he would rather weep.

‘What are you about?’ he said, as if rather affronted; and Clarence, perceiving that, if his company attempted to follow his example, the result would be confusion worse confounded, smiled a little, saying—

‘All right, we’ll begin again.’

‘“Alas, that love of her——”’

Then Juliet and Lewis looked at each other. Both were trained enough to comprehend the perfect emphasis and impersonation as the piece went on, while Dolph stood, holding his breath.
'It's acting,' whispered Juliet.  
'That's so,' responded Lewis, as the ladies' parts began.  

Now came a difficulty. Miss Pettifer, certainly inclined to giggle, but with a distinct idea of what she had been taught to do, for she had had some lessons, now began with a strong cockney accent and a mincing air of coy simplicity to put them in practice; but her cousin, a handsome rustic-looking girl, who was to play Lady Capulet, after a few inaudible whispers, suddenly broke down and began to sob hysterically.  

'I can't, Maud! I can't remember the poetry—I don't like it! I feel that silly, I can't!'  

'Oh, come, come, Sophy,' said young Pettifer, 'nonsense. You must; don't be a little fool!'  

'I can't, Vincent; do let me off. I'm not clever, like you and Maud, and I feel that silly! Won't one of the actresses do it instead?'  

'I declare,' said Mr. Lennox, 'it's the only thing to do. Here, which of you young ladies can take the part? It's your line, I suppose—to Agnes—'not the little one's?'  

'Excuse me,' interposed Clarence, 'the part was not included in the engagement with their manager. Will Sir Lewis give permission?'  

'Really, I don't think my sister can,' said Lewis, hardly realising his professional authority, 'and as for my cousin——'  

'I know every word of the play,' said Juliet. 'Of course, I know I'm too small; but couldn't she be hard and unsympathetic, and nag Juliet, instead of being grand and commanding. She did nag old Capulet, really. Wouldn't that do, Mr. Burnet?'
'If you will be kind enough to try, Miss Willingham,' said Clarence, while Mr. Lennox and Vincent Pettifer clapped their hands.

'Bravo, bravo! nice, plucky little girl, with no nonsense about her! Come along, my dear, you'll make a famous scold!'

Juliet took her place, heedless of the blank faces of her relations at this address, and the scene proceeded much more smoothly in consequence.

Then Mercutio had to come on, and Lewis's good figure and refined speech told well; but, in spite of these advantages, the Queen Mab speech fell flat and sounded like a recitation, and Lewis came off, pulling his moustaches and looking worried. The stage-managing of the banquet took a long time, and was hurried, as Miss Pettifer was impatient to begin the balcony scene, as to which she made a great display of shyness.

'She had always done it with Mr. Lennox—she didn't know if she could with any one else. She was sure it was very bad—Mr. Burnet must tell her—she didn't know which way to look, really, saying such things before people.'

Clarence requested her to move about three paces more to the right, and not to look full at him before she was supposed to see him, and then began his speech, interrupting his impassioned utterances with directions as to Miss Pettifer's movements in the driest of tones, while Juliet could hardly keep from stamping her feet in her impatience of Miss Pettifer's dreadful bad taste, as she minced and flirted, but with a certain amount of trained effectiveness. By the time this was over it was very late, and only enough time remained to see that the fighting scenes required
a great deal of study, before Mr. Pettifer proposed
an adjournment to the smoking-room. Clarence
excused himself on the ground that he wanted to
think out the arrangement of the pieces, and Sir
Lewis could have wished that the members of his
company had done so also. The supplementary young
men who filled the small parts, like Mr. Lennox, had
more social pretensions than their hosts, and treated
them with free and easy patronage, while they
endeavoured to show their familiarity with the stage
with stories at which Sir Lewis perceived that George
Buckley laughed uncomfortably, evidently thinking it
a sign of high life to show no scruples. Rupert, who
was a particular youth, got up and went to bed; and
at the first possible moment, Ernley Armytage seized
on his manager and declared he ought to throw the
whole thing up, as it wasn't fit for his sister and
cousin to stay with such vulgar people. Sir Lewis
snubbed him, all the more sharply because he did not
feel very comfortable himself.

'O Juliet,' said Agnes the next morning, as they
came downstairs, 'they called you "my dear!" How
dreadful!'

'I don't care if they call me "my darling!"' said
Juliet, 'while I can learn as much as I do every
minute I watch Mr. Burnet! I sha'n't pay any
attention to them; and, by all accounts, great houses
are free enough without acting or parvenus either.
Just look as if you didn't hear.'

'Well,' said old Mr. Pettifer over the breakfast-
table, 'any of you young folks for church this morn-
ing? Mrs. Pettifer always goes; but I suppose you'll
want to get on with your play-acting?'

'Oh, we must,' said Vincent; 'tell the parson we're
all laid up with severe colds. But our time's too precious, isn't it, Burnet?'

'Yes; I think we'd better get on with the duels,' said Clarence, 'if you wish——'

'All right. Sir Lewis, have a smoke first? I suppose you're ready?'

Sir Lewis Willingham, with the eight eyes of his four ladies full on his face, felt what it was to have put himself into a position in which he could not say no.

'Very well,' he said, 'is it to be “Romeo and Juliet”?'

'Let's stop and practise our scenes together,' said Miss Pettifer to Juliet and to Miss Dorset, 'then we'll be ready for the gentlemen after lunch.'

'No, no, Maud,' said her mother, 'whatever people's calling is, if they want to attend to their religious duties, they should be allowed. Besides, it isn't fair to make people work all Sunday. It's your play; but it's the Miss Willinghams' work, and they ought to have a 'oliday. Don't be put upon, my dears, there's plenty of time after lunch, and then no doubt you'll be good-natured.'

'Oh,' gasped Agnes, as there was a move, 'I cannot on Sunday!'

'I won't,' said Selva. 'I'm ashamed of Lewis; I never thought he would!'

'I really cannot,' said Miss Dorset. 'I, a Branch Secretary! Suppose any of the servants were G.F.S. And we couldn't explain it to Dolph.'

'Juliet, you never will?' said Agnes imploringly.

Juliet was essentially a girl of the present day; that is to say, she was accustomed to decide for herself on many points rather than to regard them as
foreclosed. The method of keeping Sunday is before the bar of her generation.

'There's Mr. Burnet; let us ask him if we professionally must,' she said; and before the others could stop her she turned and appealed to him.

'Mr. Burnet, we're not used to it, and we don't like it. We never have acted nor even learned our parts on a Sunday. Can we say no when we are acting for pay? Is it part of what we have to go in for?'

Clarence looked at her very gravely and gently.

'No manager could require it of you,' he said; 'we should grumble considerably if they did; but, I suppose, on this sort of occasion refusing would be awkward.'

'Well,' said Juliet heroically, 'I'll do it if it's necessary; but my cousins would rather go home, they think it so wrong, and it would get Aunt Anne into a dreadful scrape with the G.F.S. But I'll do it, if I must.'

'Well,' said Clarence, much in the dark as to the nature of Miss Anne's obligations, 'I'll prevent it if I can, but I'm afraid you will find it makes things rather disagreeable.'

It made things very disagreeable within the limits of the 'Wills o' the Wisp' Company. Sir Lewis, when his womankind came back from church, and his wife indignantly set upon him, told her that she was unpractical and nonsensical; a thing might be done once and not made a precedent of—in fact, he wanted it to be done and not talked about; a view shared more or less by the other young men, who were not perhaps in the habit of so spending their Sunday afternoons as to feel it necessary to go to the stake on the matter. He further added a sentiment which,
when misapplied, is peculiarly calculated to produce irritation—namely, that the spirit is of more importance than the letter. Selva’s views of duty might be external, but they were strong, and calculating consequences was not in her line, so she simply reiterated that she would not act on Sunday, not if the whole scheme of the ‘Wills o’ the Wisp’ were imperilled by refusing.

It did not cost the bright young wife half what it cost the thoughtful sister. She dwelt on what Sunday had become to her at Coalham, and had been ever since. She recollected what David Merrifield had once said—‘The essence of the Christian Sabbath is love to Him whose second birthday it is.’ And could such love be shown in the noisy tumult and fret of such a rehearsal? No, she must cling to that love even though Lewis’s anger should break her heart, and Alice Wharton and David Merrifield both should believe her yielding, and think she had turned aside from all that was good. So, with prayers and tears, she took her resolution and shut herself up in her room. Then at the sound of the bell she crept downstairs to church as if she were doing something wrong, mortally afraid of being seen and ordered in to the banquet rehearsal. She lost her way and felt like an emblem of her present life, came in late and found Selva, the governess, and the little girl of the family there before her.

For the others it ended as might have been expected. Miss Pettifer never dreamed of not rehearsing, and wanted her mother and her nurse in the afternoon. Miss Dorset gave in, and hoped neither the G.F.S. nor her sister would ever hear of it; while Juliet speedily forgot everything but the play.
Clarence could, of course, do nothing to help them beyond putting forward the masculine parts of the piece. To his own conscience the matter was indifferent, but it gave him the most curious pain to see Juliet forcing hers.

It was a most uncomfortable week. The immense quantity of work to be got through, for which Sir Lewis was mainly responsible, hurried and fussed every one concerned. Clarence Burnet's professional authority, Mr. Lennox's amateur experience, and Sir Lewis's views as to the production of his own pieces, frequently jarred and clashed. Lewis's temper was tried by his increasing sense of his own and his troupe's deficiencies, and he worried his brother and sister as to theirs, till Rupert rebelled and Agnes lost whatever liveliness the uncongenial atmosphere and the oppression on her conscience had left to her, while even Miss Nance grew tired of the sight of the stage. None of them had realised how wearisome too much of the thing they had thought so good might be. Then, the Pettifers were good-natured people and intended to be most kind to the 'professionals,' but they treated the 'Wills o' the Wisp' entirely as the professionals they aspired to be, not as people in society doing a clever thing. They only half believed in the title which had no money to support it, while Mr. Lennox and his friends were accustomed to ways at amateur theatricals, where titles were not unknown, which were at least as distasteful to the Willinghams as the want of breeding of their hosts. There was a great deal of champagne, and whisky and seltzer at all hours of the day and night, and Vincent Pettifer and Mr. Lennox kept up the fire of their geniuses by frequent applications of it. Beer was dealt out with a liberal hand to all the
servants and helpers, till it could only be hoped that Dolph would remember that he wore a blue ribbon. Then there was, first, the free-and-easiness of amateurs, who thought it showed how nearly they were professionals; secondly, the natural hail-fellow-well-met manners of the actor Carter, who was not at all a bad fellow, but who did not see why he should not call the girls little dears, pat them on the shoulder, and offer them a taste of his pick-me-up; until, suddenly, he was so effectually shut up by something or some one that he never willingly spoke to the Miss Willinghams again. Then there was all the risky intimacy between young men and girls in a state of nervous excitement and in unusual situations, without the sobering sense of working for their daily bread. Maud Pettifer's one thought was Mr. Lennox, and her little sister, Dolly, who was put forward to play Anne Carew's child, was full of precocious sentiment. Lastly, there was the more intolerable coolness of men like Lennox and his friends, who thought they obliged their hosts by visiting them, and therefore could treat them as they pleased.

And the 'Wills o' the Wisp' had to fulfil their engagement. Sir Lewis and Miss Nance ate the bread of experience in silence, but they made some wry faces over it. Ernley Armytage was so sulky that he and his manager nearly quarrelled. George Buckley, on the other hand, accommodated himself to pick-me-ups and free-and-easiness with startling rapidity, and frequently assured Juliet of his devotion to the drama. Selva, though very well able to take care of herself, was furious at finding that, as a pretty young married woman, she was more the object of attention than Agnes and Juliet, and Major O'Connor resented
freedom towards the girls, of whom he regarded himself as the protector.

But there were two people to whom all these vexations were trifles light as air. Juliet was so absorbed in her part and in watching Clarence Burnet act, that she was scarcely conscious of the world around her. Sometimes she was happy with the sense of improvement and discovery, sometimes miserable at her own defects; but, in her entire absorption in her art, bad manners passed by her like the wind; she laughed and took no notice; her soul was in Verona and in the Forest of Arden.

Clarence Burnet, to whom bad acting and frivolous society were alike odious, looked back afterwards on the days when he had to act with Miss Pettifer and associate with her brother as days of bliss. He kept his temper, which was naturally none of the sweetest, through every vexation. He threw all his powers into his task, and pulled the difficult business through. He needed neither pick-me-ups nor flirtations, he saw art profaned with indifference, artist though he might be. He saw idleness, and luxury, and self-indulgence, and the eager aping of one class by another; and Radical, almost Socialist as he was, he did not care. For, in truth, he could see nothing but Juliet Willingham, and the enchantment was too strong and too sudden to be resisted.

Poor Clarence! The Hildon Castle theatricals were likely to prove more dangerous to the professional actor than to any of the amateurs.
CHAPTER XII

"IT IS MY LADY—OH, IT IS MY LOVE!"

'Monks' Warren Park, Heathshire,'  
'10th August.

'Dear Clarence—What has induced you to go in for this affair at Hildon Castle? You, who hate amateurs and great houses and moneyed folk about equally. To stage-manage for a set of Gorgias Midases must be a delightful experience. Wills o' the Wisp! Marsh spirits and Philistine cads! What a combination! Ah, no, the dream will never be realised! all art is a half-defeated struggle to bring the divine into the human; but dramatic art, which should speak the message most plainly, which should "purify by pity and terror," which should give all but actual experience of the soul's possibilities—that is the most earth-bound of all, the most hampered by degrading conditions, tied and bound by earthly chains, till the beautiful angel's face is bowed in the dust, and frivolity, folly, bad taste, greed of gain, and the wickedness of men has hidden all her glory. No, I could not come and recite at Hildon even to meet you. (Besides, Emily doesn't want to know the Pettifers.) But come here afterwards and help me to interpret Hamlet to the literary club at Warrenstoke. Those young fellows do appreciate Shakespeare. One—the youngest of them—
most. But I don’t feel as if I make much way in getting to know their real selves. The trail of the squire is over me still, even there, though I did not locate the club at Monks’ Warren on purpose to have it in a freer air. You can excogitate the hero-villain who is to make the fortune of the Planet. Good idea to unite the rival parts. “One Soul and Two Faces” ought to score a success. Your father’s congregation wants to put a Gothic front on to the chapel. He calls it “hankering after the flesh-pots of Egypt,” and I told him to stick to the original whitewash; but I’m afraid he won’t. The connection at Warren-stoke have got a spire. His new shop is something too splendid. Dick is at home; his churchmanship is somewhat aggressive as our socialism used to be, but he means well, as we did. Do come, there is nothing much on this month as to society, though perhaps, after this new departure, society might be an attraction to you.—Yours ever,

‘ALARIC LAMBOURNE.’

Clarence Burnet read this letter during a pause in the festivities at Hildon Castle. The first representation of ‘As You Like It!’ was over. The numerous guests, some of whom were filling up every corner of the great house, and others who had come over for the afternoon only, were strolling about the lawns, drinking tea and eating fruit. Their gay and dainty figures flashed out of the shadow into the sunlight, grouping themselves under the heavy shade of the cedars around the dazzling beds of gaudy flowers—forming a scene as picturesque and hardly less fantastic than that which had lately been stolen from the Forest of Arden—a forest which the great trees at the end of the lawn
represented not inaptly; for, though the lioness was left to the imagination, tall palms and tropic ferns from the conservatory gave an air of enchantment to the British beeches and oak trees among which they were grouped; a piece of stage-management for which the better informed among the guests gave the 'Wills o' the Wisp' infinite credit.

Some of the actors, still in costume, had mingled with the audience and were enjoying their praises and congratulations. Clarence Burnet, who considered wearing his stage dress when off duty 'bad form,' had divested himself of the semblance of the melancholy Jacques, but was sitting a little apart under a tree as if still in search of solitude.

'Dear old boy!' he thought, as he finished the letter, 'he'll always beat his wings now and again against the bars. Penalty, I suppose, for having wings! Even his wife is glad when he folds them and is content in the big cage. Of course, I'll go to him. He doesn't quite see the situation——'

A light step startled him, as Juliet, once more in maiden weeds, approached and said timidly—

'Please, Mr. Burnet, do tell me if you really think it went well?'

There was an appealing look in her eyes and a slight quiver on her sensitive lips, as if she had summoned up all her courage to ask for the criticism on which so much depended.

'I think it went very well indeed!' he said.

'Because,' said Juliet, 'you never do tell us what you really think, or make any criticism, except about the places where we are to stand; and, of course, you do criticise us inwardly.'

'Why,' said Clarence, with his grave smile, 'if I
did go beyond my province, we might be in the first scene of "Romeo and Juliet" still.

'That's very severe; but I daresay we should.'

'I think this piece does Sir Lewis the greatest credit,' said Clarence eagerly. 'The acting is mostly bright and fresh, and goes well together. I like it very much.'

'Yes,' said Juliet. 'Now find fault with Rosalind. That is, if you think me worth it. As an artist, to one who loves art.' Clarence's head swam a little, and to ejaculate 'heavenly Rosalind' would have suited the weight that passion hung upon his tongue, better than to meet her innocent impersonal eyes and answer as artist to artist. But the lawn at Hildon was not the forest at Arden, and the days were over when a gallant youth dared at once to sigh at the feet of a princess. Honour to the modern maiden must be differently shown. He must tell her the absolute truth.

'You have a beautiful voice,' he said, 'with a quality that no teaching could give you. For use in a theatre it would require training. You have great power of expression both by gesture and look; but you have a great deal to learn as to when to use your powers, and there are certain technicalities which you, naturally, don't understand, which would enable you to give effect to your ideas.'

'But have I the idea? Could I learn?'

Clarence looked sideways at her under his long eyelashes with feelings more akin to those of Harry Merrifield than that young man would have thought possible; but truth compelled him to answer—

'Yes, I have no doubt you could.'

Juliet drew a long breath of relief.
‘And have I the right conception of Rosalind if I could act well; have I imagined her rightly?’

‘Yes, rightly; hardly perhaps sufficiently. You have all her brightness and liveliness; but Rosalind, after all, was unhappy, and she was in love. There should be an undercurrent—perhaps even a note of bitterness—of passion, running all through.’

‘Yes,’ said Juliet, thoughtfully; ‘but that makes her much harder to do.’

‘She is not supposed to be very easy.’

‘I—I wonder if you would think I put enough feeling into Juliet? Oh, I should like you to see me try that! And it would have been much easier if you had acted Orlando. Mr. Pettifer hasn’t a bit of feeling, has he now?’

‘Well, not very much. But I couldn’t play Orlando well. My cousin Alaric played it, to my mind, perfectly. Those graceful parts are not in my line. I believe my Romeo is much too heavy in hand. Alaric used to say that I did not realise that he often made a fool of himself!’

‘Well, I shall always think of Romeo as like you. Mr. Lambourne was really an actor once, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes, for a short time, but he was obliged to give it up.’

‘What a dreadful pity!’

‘I suppose so, in some ways. But he has other things to do, and, besides, he is hardly strong enough for it.’

‘Why, do you find it such hard work?’

‘I? Oh, not too hard for myself. But I was brought up to work hard, and hardships and annoyances are naturally nothing to me. I was a newspaper
hack before I was an actor, and if I had followed
my father's trade I should, as you probably know,
have been a grocer in a small way. So I certainly
can't complain of hard work in following my voca-
tion.'

As Juliet obviously did not quite know how to
answer this speech, he went on, urged by an irresistible
impulse to let her know his history.

'No doubt you know Alaric's father married my
aunt, a circus dancer. But my father took up a
different line, he is a strong dissenter. When my
cousin came across me he chose to seek me out,—I
was sore, before at the very thought of his existence;
but he only wanted to share every advantage he had
with me. I couldn't tell you all he risked and sacri-
ficed for me; but he gave me all he could of his own
education, taught me word by word to speak the lines
with a proper accent and emphasis. I owe all my
success to him!'

Clarence's voice thrilled, he had the nature that
tends to hero-worship, and his cousin was his hero.
In speaking of him he almost forgot that he had
begun to speak with the intention that his position
in life should be exactly clear to Juliet.

'It was very nice of him,' she said; 'and of course
he is among the sensible people who believe in acting.
I wish we knew him!'

Clarence took off the watch and chain he wore,
and opened a gold locket that hung to them.

'He gave me this,' he said, 'so here is his
likeness.'

It was that of a young man with a delicate brown-
tinted face, rather worn and thin, the soft dark eyes
looking sideways out of the picture, and a slight black
moustache over a mouth with the suggestion of a smile on it.

'It has a sort of foreign look. It is like you!' said Juliet.

'I believe so. He thinks our common ancestor was a gipsy.'

'Well, yes. But the eyes have an odd expression—like a picture, or a woman, or an animal almost, as if they were trying to speak and people couldn't understand.'

'Ah,' said Clarence, 'sometimes that's so! But I am detaining you too long with talking about myself.'

'Not at all,' said Juliet. 'Now I can talk about myself. You know,' she went on, poking her parasol into the turf, and looking away from him, 'I see that the "Wills" will never last. I don't know about my cousin Lewis; but some of them can't do it, and some don't like it, and Aunt Anne wants to do other things as well. She actually won't give up her "Diocesan Council" for it! But I mean to stick to it. It has been the dream of my life, and if you think I am clever enough, I want you to tell me how to set about really studying for the stage.'

'I—I don't think you can know the difficulties!' exclaimed Clarence.

'Oh yes, I do! But I am very strong. I don't get tired, and I have quite enough money to live on while I am studying. And I shouldn't think there could be more disagreeable people than there are here. I shouldn't think any actors could be more odious than that Mr. Lennox, and I don't mind him a bit. I never think of him at all.'

'He strikes me as a person without a single redeeming point,' said Clarence, intending to speak with
great moderation, but with so much the tone that he might have used if he had been standing over Mr. Lennox with a drawn sword, and calling him a foul miscreant, that Juliet was quite startled.

'Well, Agnes does loathe him,' she said.

'It is not pleasant for her to have to play with him,' said Clarence. 'But, Miss Willingham, it is a very hard life, and for a young lady——'

'Mr. Burnet,' said Juliet, 'I don't think you are true to your own ideal! I suppose you think it a splendid thing for yourself to be an actor; and I did not think you would be so old-fashioned as to talk about "young ladies." Why, Agnes's friends, those Merrifields, would take that line. They talk as if goodness consisted in prejudice!'

'I have had to learn that it can exist in spite of it,' said Clarence.

'Good people are prejudiced,' said Juliet petulantly.

'I don't think they are much more so than bad ones,' said Clarence candidly.

'Well,' said Juliet, with a laugh, 'that doesn't matter. Perhaps,' she added, blushing, 'I have been too bold. I ought to wait till you have seen more of my acting. But you will tell me truly, won't you, before we go away? Because I can make sacrifices, when my whole heart is given to anything, though I am a young lady. You know, you must know, that acting is living, as nothing else is. You don't know what to-day has been to me.'

'I will tell you truly, before we go away,' said Clarence, in slow, measured tones. And as he spoke, some others of the party came up, and Juliet joined them, to hear eager and indiscriminate praise of her and her cousin's Rosalind and Celia, the only criticism being
that it was a pity that the lines as to their relative heights had had to be omitted, since nothing could conceal the unlucky fact that Celia was the taller of the two. As for Clarence, he admired her spirit, and if she had not been just herself, would have gladly furthered her views in a practical and sensible fashion, for he did think highly of her powers. But, when his heart went out, his one instinct was to protect and guard, and save from pain and struggle. He wanted to fight for Juliet, not by her side, and she looked right through him at his acting.

He had known in his early days bitter disappointment, he did not in the least expect to find life easy; but as he dressed himself for Romeo that night, he did not find it at all difficult to realise the possibility of making a fool of himself. When Juliet came on as Lady Capulet, she received a greeting which told of the impression that her Rosalind had made, and she showed herself to be a true artist by her power of throwing herself into the less congenial part. Her acting was clever, and did much to help out the unequal performance, in which Romeo swamped and overweighted his Juliet, and played with a passion which he knew himself was in far too high a key for the rest of the piece. But to Juliet Willingham, it was the intensest delight she had ever known, she could conceive of no greater, except to play the Juliet herself. The dramatic passion was on her, the strange madness that is as wild as love, and all but as entrancing. Her eyes blazed, and her cheeks flamed, as the fire of enthusiasm within her burned away conceit and flattery and frivolous amusement, and so filled her soul that it left no space for any other flame. She was quite safe for the time, both from personal senti-
ment and personal vanity, safe as if she had been a
vestal virgin. While to Maud Pettifer the heroine
was no one but herself, and the excitement of the
acting so threw her off her balance that there was
no folly for which she was not ready. There are a
great many more Mauds than Juliets in the world of
amateur theatricals, and some of them make a very
fair show in it.

Poor Agnes had no enthusiasm, and scarcely any
vanity, and she so detested her Colonel Kirke, that
what little spirit she had put into her acting failed
her, and the 'Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,' which was
one of Lewis's crack pieces, fell decidedly flat, being
further weighted by a constant feud between Ernley
Armytage and Mr. Lennox.

The Irish piece had gone off out of doors with
flying colours, and was extremely popular. It was the
darling of Lewis's fancy, and was the exclusive pro-
duction of the 'Wills o' the Wisp.' An English-bred
heiress (Agnes) succeeded to a disaffected Irish estate.
Her agent, also her distant lover (Rupert), was un-
popular, she was boycotted, and guarded by the police
(Lewis and George Buckley). Juliet was a coquettish
English maid; the Major an Irish ruffian; Selva a
charming peasant; Miss Anne an ancient hag cruelly
evicted. But Dolph, as her grandson, a wild gossoon,
won over by the sweet heiress, was the star of the
piece. He hid in the bushes to hear her sing; saved
her life by an ingenious plot, which kept her from
passing the ambushed murderers; then, convicted of
the warning, was mortally wounded, and rushed in to
die at her feet, just as the devoted agent, who had been
wounded in her stead, was rewarded by her hand, for
the true heir in the person of Ernley turned up from
the backwoods, and all ended happily, save for the humorous pathos of the wild imp's death, which carried off all the halting construction of the piece, the extreme secrecy of Rupert's distant devotion, which he failed even to betray to the audience, and Agnes's inability to show any answering encouragement.

The whirl of excitement and exertion, brilliant company and brilliant weather, vexations and *tracasseries*, enjoyment and triumph, boredom and annoyance, came to an end. The 'Wills o' the Wisp' were amply paid, and considerably flattered, for it had been the very grandest of *fêtes*, a time to be remembered in all the countryside. It was reported and described in society papers, and certainly made the performances of the 'Wills o' the Wisp' irretrievably public. And Clarence Burnet, in the ten minutes before they separated, looking very grave and a little pale about the mouth, told Juliet, that after all, when it came to the real thing, to real acting in a great theatre, she had still almost everything to learn, she had months of hard work before her, fears and doubts and difficulties, and then success, perhaps.

'Yes,' said Juliet, with her undaunted eyes; 'but I only want to begin, when it is possible, you will tell me how to manage?'

'I will try.'

'I shall never forget this week, and all I have learned from seeing you act.'

'I shall never—I shall never forget it either.'
CHAPTER XIII

MRS. PETTIFER'S ADVICE

'Well,' said Miss Dorset, with her dainty afternoon tea spread under her vine-clad verandah to greet the dusty travellers.

'Well,' responded Juliet triumphantly.

'Well,' said Miss Anne, in a composed tone, seating herself by her sister.

'Well,' said Lewis, in a tone of infinite relief, throwing himself at length on the grass.

'Well,' said Rupert, 'I should think you had had enough of snobs.'

'Well, my mannie! my jewel!' cried Selva, holding her son alternately aloft, and squeezing him to her bosom. 'Did his daddy and mammy go away and leave him? And did he cut a little white tooth while his mammy wasn't there to help him, but was gone off a-playacting among a set of ridiculous, stupid people? And is he very glad to see her again, her own, own boy—that is prettier than all she has seen put together!'

All these 'wells' were uttered simultaneously, so that Lady Willingham's flood of maternal nonsense formed the last words audible.

'Is that the general opinion?' said Aunt Marion, as she gave the cups to Rupert to hand round, while Lewis resigned his face to be clawed by his son and heir.
Agnes gave a gasp of assent, and stooped to kiss her nephew. Rupert exclaimed 'Emphatically.' Aunt Nance said again, 'Well, it was rather fun.'

'Really,' said Selva, 'the old lady was rather jolly. She is a good old thing. She took me over the house the last morning, when you were all rehearsing, and showed me her hot-water pipes and smart beds and all, and got quite confidential. Don't poke out your father's eyes, you unnatural gossoon!'

'And what did she tell you?' was the cry, for owing to crowded trains and companionship, they had not been alone together since their departure.

'Poor old lady, she grew quite affectionate when she found out that I had a baby at home, and she took me up into the great big empty nurseries—large enough to lose you in, you little varlet—and sat down in an old nursing-chair, and said how much nicer it had been when her son Vincent was little, and she had done everything for him, whereas she was hardly allowed, by the fine lady nurse, even to see that little youngest, and there was one that died, that she was quite sure his nurse had not done right by. She cried—oh, cried piteously, and said, "My dear, my dear, don't let anything take you right away from your child, you'll never get over it;" and when I said I never went away for more than a day or two, and he had a dear good aunt, and my husband's old nurse, she shook her head and said "it wasn't the same thing." And she was right, wasn't she, my precious? Oh, and then she was very curious, now we had grown so affectionate, to know whether I was really my lady or only Mrs. Williams, for nothing would get it out of her head or her husband's that ours wasn't only a theatrical name, and she knew it was the custom, but she didn't like
pretence. So I told her she had only to buy a peer-age new enough, and she would find us all set down; and then I told her how Lewis had come to guard my uncle from the moonlighters, and carried off the poor little Irish girl without a penny in her pocket, and how, when we had lost all our money, we couldn't do anything but live by our wits. And she cried and kissed me, and then she said, "But now, my dear, wouldn't it be ever so much better for all of you to turn to something solid. If your husband would turn his mind to a clerkship; I've no doubt Pettifer would give him one. Then you could be with your baby, you see. I don't mind a bit of acting for Vincent and Maud, all amatoor, since nothing else will serve them, though it turns the house upside down. Young folks must have their fancies, but it ain't the same as being professional, and that ain't the thing for two nice young ladies like your sisters. I wouldn't have it for my Maud."

'Jolly old party!' cried Rupert; 'who would have thought there was so much sense under her stunning satins? Why, Armytage has been vowing that he'd never act again among such a crew of cads except for the sake of defending Agnes from impertinence.'

'Was anybody impertinent?' asked Aunt Marion anxiously.

'Oh no,' said Juliet. 'Mr. Burnet took care of that.'

'But is he a gentleman?'

'He behaved as sich,' said Lewis.

'Which is more than can be said of some,' added Aunt Ann; 'though the Major took a great deal of care of us; and it was an experience!'

'It was,' echoed Agnes emphatically.
'A disgusting caricature of ourselves,' said Miss Anne.

'The professional was not so bad,' said Selva, 'or one expected nothing better, and Mr. Burnet suppressed him. It was the gentlemen, as they called themselves. I declare I felt near about throwing my tea-cup at that insinuating fellow's head, that one whom Pettifer called the honourable Mr. Lennox!'

'Well, it would have made a sensation,' said Lewis, laughing, 'and passed off as the "wild Irishwoman's manners."'

'Manners! 'tis little they had of that,' said Selva.

'Manners they have none, and customs very beastly,' quoted her husband.

'Buckley didn't think so,' said Rupert significantly.

'George Buckley is an ass!' returned Lewis.

'He was very blue at being only Bobby No. 2,' added Rupert. 'If we do that Irish thing again, I wish you would make him heir, or agent, or something.'

'Can't look like it!' said Juliet. 'There is a shade more acting in him than in the old giant of Egypt, but he's always thinking about himself.'

'H'm!' said Rupert.

'And it is easier to deal with him,' said Lewis, 'because he goes shares with us, while Armytage will accept nothing.'

'Besides,' added Rupert, 'they did not seem to care in the slightest degree about Ernley being a bit of a hero.'

'Dense of them!' said Agnes, 'but I think their homage would have been worse.'

'And how did the Major get on?' asked Miss Dorset.
‘He was very huffy at first,’ said Selva, ‘could not get over being taken for a professional; but he was mollified by the compliments we Irish got after “Murther in Irish,” though none of us were fit to hold a candle to Dolph.’

‘Yes, Dolph’s the real genius,’ said Lewis; ‘he died like an Irish edition of Mercutio, and set old Mrs. Pettifer—yes, and all the old people, off crying and sobbing.’

‘The old and the children,’ said Aunt Anne; ‘the young were above such weakness.’

‘Mr. Burnet was very much struck with him,’ added Juliet; ‘he longs to have the training of him.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Miss Dorset.

‘Falling into prejudices, Aunt Minnie,’ said Lewis. ‘I suppose it is as good a trade as any other, and will put that boy a peg or two higher in life.’

‘He is a very good boy still,’ said Agnes; ‘he got four or five pounds altogether in presents, and he brought it all to me, to put into the saving’s bank; but I should be very sorry for him to go again into such a set of servants. They jeered at his blue ribbon, “just as one reads in books, ma’am,” he told me; “and they has champagne at the housekeeper’s table.”’

There was more laughter than Agnes thought quite called for at her tone of horror, but she was relieved by hearing Lewis say, as the party began to disperse, ‘Well! we made a good thing of it as far as the tin goes, but catch me going to a house I don’t know more about another time—I’ve another notion.’

It was a stroke, however, to Agnes that Rupert, who had walked down from the station, said, as he followed her towards the door, ‘I met Ripley, and he says that poor chap that you gave the sack to has been
desperately ill—inflammation of the lungs—obliged to strike work, and so on.’

‘No!’ said Agnes, turning round with a face of dismay.

‘Come!’ said Rupert, ‘you need not take it so to heart, you know. People don’t have love in their lungs. If he went and got wet through in that thunderstorm, it was not your doing.’

Nevertheless, Agnes did take it to heart, and went through a great deal in her own room, between doubts whether she had really trifled with him at Coalham, whether she had been improperly harsh and ungrateful in her rejection, and whether after all it might not be foolish conceit that made her reproach herself with his illness. More than once she took out paper to write to either Alice Wharton or Elizabeth Merrifield to inquire, but a sort of shame always hindered her, even while she longed to tell all, and obtain a really trustworthy opinion whether she were to blame for consenting to the career which was more unpleasant to her than ever.

Conscientious and self-conscious persons have to suffer a good deal more than their neighbours if involved in a doubtful undertaking.

Aunt Anne, having no self-consciousness, did not suffer half so much, when, in the spirit of her childhood, she confessed her Sunday rehearsal to her elder sister, who was greatly concerned.

‘O Anne, I did not think you could have consented! When the young ones stood out so bravely too!’

‘Well, I wanted to save them from being pressed, and I knew that our scenes would occupy all the time. Besides, it seemed due to our hosts not to disgust them and upset all their plans.’
Miss Dorset shook her head. Like many of her generation, she was much more strict as to Sunday than as to any amount of amusements in the week. 'Such an example,' she said, 'for all of them. Why, if you had all shown a brave front, how good it would have been for these people themselves; and they had no right to insist.'

'So Mr. Burnet said, and I was sorry afterwards that I had given in when I saw what underbred people they were; but it was the first day, and it seemed wrong to be disobliging and overthrow all their arrangements. However, it will not happen again, Lewis has promised.'

'Thanks to good little Selva.'

'He says he will never go to a private house again without knowing more about the family.'

'Humph! Picking and choosing is not the way to make the affair answer!'

'I heard him promise Ernley Armytage. I doubt whether Ernley would hold to us after this if it were not for Agnes.'

'O—oh—I never thought so! Why, they have known one another all their lives.'

'True, but the attempt of that unlucky clergy-boy, as Juliet calls him, seems to have waked the slumbering fire; and I don't know that it is desirable. I'm talking stage, I declare. But there, he will not be badly off, and poor Agnes has nothing!'

'But her face!' ejaculated Miss Marian. 'And if she did not take up with him when he came home fresh with his wounds and his exploits, I should not think she ever would.'

Wherewith the sisters laughed at their own scheming.
When Lewis thought himself in duty bound to walk down to the office and see how affairs were going on, he met on the way young George Buckley, who immediately addressed him. 'Going down to the shop?—I say, you must soft sawder the old boss a bit. He's turned rusty. Wants to pin me down, says he wants me, and so forth; just as I am getting my hand in too. I believe it is all jealousy of the girls at my getting a cut above them in society.'

'Oh! If you take that for good society you are much mistaken!' said Lewis, surveying him with some scorn, mixed with vexation as he heard this sudden change of language from the correctness of speech that George used to affect.

'Ah! What? Old Pettifer was nobody, but there were plenty of swells, and one picked up a thing or two. Only stop his jaw, Willingham! I'll never desert you, and you may count on me to withstand any opposition.'

Lewis went on his way to the little den, where the remains of the business had been transferred from their old office, and where he found old Mr. Buckley in the midst of his ledgers. Things were on the mend here, and since the crash, had begun to look up a little. There had been a strike at the harbour which had injured them; vessels were coming back, and it was not in human nature not to rejoice; but Mr. Buckley, an intensely respectable gray-haired man of business, still looked grave and worn, and presently began—

'There's enough to do here now for George to be needed.'

'I am glad of it! You know he is never called upon for more than a night or two at a time.'
'Yes, and comes home with money in his pocket to take him down to the billiard-room!'

'Indeed!' said Lewis, more sorry than surprised, though not convinced that young Buckley's visits to the billiard-room were not begun long previously.

'You see,' said the old gentleman, who had known the young baronet from a boy; 'I had no objection to all your theatricals and tomfoolery as long as it was all among friends. It gave the lad something to do, studying his part in the evening, and kept him out of mischief; and when you thought of making it a paying business—well, I wouldn't stand in your way, after all that is come and gone, but I did not expect to have him come home to vex his mother with smoking all over the house, and asking for brandy and water at all sorts of times, telling us it is the thing, just despising us at home, as if his mother could not give him a dinner fit to eat, and running off to the billiard-room at Jones's because we are so dull! Is that what your fashionable society has put him up to?'

'I am afraid they were a shady lot—some of them,' said Lewis. 'I had no notion what it would be like, or I should never have gone to Hildon. I will take care to know my ground better another time.'

'Umph! But if this kind of thing is to go on you must reckon on doing without George.'

'I have some notion of taking a little theatre for a few weeks. Then it would all be in my own hands.'

'Umph! Regularly on the stage! I say, Lewis, what would your father have said to all this?'

'Oh! he would not have minded,' said Lewis, rather off-hand. 'He always promoted theatricals among the officers.'
However, Lewis was glad to have the further discussion cut short by the entrance of a skipper.

His next measure was to betake himself to Miss Dorset, and ask her consent to inviting Mr. Burnet for a day or two, to talk over matters and arrangements. She gave it, the less unwillingly, since, as she said, 'I shall get some better notion what the thing is like!'
'I HEAR A VOICE YOU CANNOT HEAR'¹

'Now then, Clarence, I want to hear all about the "splendid and noteworthy festivities," and "the somewhat ambitious, but highly creditable dramatic performance" at which you have been assisting. Here's half a page about it all in Fact.'

So spoke Alaric Lambourne, about an hour or so after his cousin's arrival, as they sat smoking together in the shady corner of the terrace at Monks' Warren Park. There were little tables, comfortable chairs, and gay soft rugs near at hand, great trees and green undulating slopes in the foreground, and a wide stretch of purple heather in the distance. It was a pleasant place to lounge away a summer afternoon, and its owner, a tall slender young man, was lying lazily back in a long straw chair, looking at his cousin who sat opposite to him.

'What does the thing say?' asked Clarence.

'Describes the company and the gardens and the entertainment, makes civil remarks about Mr. Clarence Burnet, gushing ones about the talented amateurs, and pats the "Wills o' the Wisp" kindly on the back.'

'Let me see,' said Clarence, taking the paper and reading—'"promising little actress, espiègle and en-

¹ See Jack o' Lanthorn, by C. R. Coleridge (A. D. Turner and Co.).
gaging, may make a Rosalind after twelve months' study; the Celia must disabuse herself of the idea that it is enough to look handsome. Mr. Vincent Pettifer, manly and straightforward as Orlando. Honourable Charles Lennox made the most of the small part of Oliver, one of our most noted amateurs"—insolent brute!

'That's not in the paper,' said Alaric.

Clarence here expressed his opinion of Mr. Lennox and others of the Hildon Castle company with much force and energy.

'Why,' said Alaric, 'I thought Willingham was a very decent sort of fellow.'

'Willingham? Oh yes. The "Wills" are quite another sort.'

'And can they act?'

'Some of them can. Sir Lewis is not bad, in his own line. They have a lad belonging to them, the cleverest little imp you ever saw, and—yes—the young lady who played Rosalind has a good deal of talent.'

'I was asking, because Emily and I have been at Rotherwood, and Lady Rotherwood wanted to know if I thought this new company would be a good speculation for some festivities in the autumn. I don't know if she had an eye to you.'

'And is Rotherwood a good style of place?' said Clarence anxiously. 'Would there be the same sort of thing as at Hildon?'

Alaric opened his dark eyes wide, and called to a lady who came out of the drawing-room window. 'Emily! Clarence wants to know if Rotherwood is a correct house, and fit for him to go to.'

'Really, Alaric!' exclaimed Clarence, 'I never said—I did not mean—but the "Wills o' the Wisp"—'
'Oh, do tell me about the "Wills o' the Wisp," said Mrs. Lambourne, as she sat down on one of the vacant chairs. Rotherwood is about the correctest great house in England. Are the "Wills" very correct? That's what Lady Rotherwood was asking, as it seems rather an odd move to go about as strolling players.'

'Like the Vincent Crummyles,' said Alaric. 'Does the clever imp, or the engaging Rosalind, represent the Infant Phenomenon?'

'I thought you knew them,' said Clarence gruffly.

'No,' said Mrs. Lambourne. 'I believe Alaric met Sir Lewis once. But it does seem rather funny to go about in that way—with his wife, too. That sort of thing is all very well for girls, but I do think a woman should give it up when she is married.'

'He is a scatter-brained kind of fellow, not fit to take care of them. But I don't see how they can go on long. The younger brother—he's a nice boy, but a perfect stick—is going back to Oxford; and the aunt, Miss Dorset, their first old woman, seems to belong to some other company which has claims upon her time.'

'Another dramatic company? How very odd!' said Emily.

'Perhaps they provide amusements for parishes, or something of that sort,' said Clarence, 'for she seemed to think she ought not to rehearse on Sunday. The G.F.S. Society she called it.'

Alaric and his wife went off into fits of laughter.

'It's an excellent institution, Clarence; looks after young women. It's patronised by all the swells. But there's a spice of trade's unionism at the bottom of it, though the good ladies don't know it. Give him one of your pink magazines, Emily; he might get the
Miss Willinghams to join, and be a link with the stage, you know. Such a chance!'

Alaric intended to tease his wife, who only remarked, happily—

'Clarence knows how much nonsense you can talk, Alaric.' But he saw, to his astonishment, that his cousin looked solemn, and said—

'Well, then, if it is a thing that Emily belongs to, you see that Miss Dorset and her nieces are—are—you see the kind of people they must be. Of course, probably, I shall never meet them again; but to act for Lady Rotherwood would be exactly the kind of thing they lay themselves out for.'

'What are you going to do till the Planet reopens?'

'Why, you see, I had almost promised to go to the States with a man I know something of, who was taking out a company. That fell through and put me out. Clarke wants to get up a tour. I might go to him. But the Planet piece wants a great deal of study. Raymond Rivers is a big part.'

'Stay here and study him, then.'

'Yes, do,' chimed in Emily, 'and keep Alaric in order. He has worried himself into two bad headaches this week already, about things that are not his fault. You know, hot weather never suits him. But he will have his own way.' She laid her hand on her husband's shoulder and looked down at him with a sweet grave smile, then added, 'I must go and see Mrs. Leslie, yes, about the Girl's Friendly Society, Clarence. And I shall ask all your people to come up to-morrow to tea in the garden. Dick is there, you know, and they will be delighted to come and see you.'

'Thank you, you are too kind always,' said
Clarence, as she moved away. 'But what's amiss, Alaric? I thought you looked tired.'

Alaric looked at him with something of the expression that Juliet had compared to that of an animal which wanted to speak. 'Can't you tell me?' said Clarence, answering the look.

"'Wills o' the Wisp,'" said Alaric, smiling.

'What?'

'Oh, not Sir Lewis Willingham and his dramatic company—all the Jack o' Lanthorns, corpse-candles, stars in the east, that dance before my eyes, and lead me into quicksands and quagmires! Visions that I can't see, dreams that I can't interpret; or, perhaps, it's only the ancestral gipsy urging me to go off on the tramp.'

'You were always cracked on the gipsy,' said Clarence.

'Well, I had my "Wanderjahr" once; but I think I want one about every seven years—a metaphorical spree, anyhow.'

'You had better come round with the "Wills o' the Wisp" in good earnest.'

'There's some originality in their notion; but it won't work. Miss What's-her-name, your first old lady, is an allegory of the irreconcilability of life. Don't you think I make a much better squire than might have been expected, Clarence?'

'As I once told you, if they were all like you, there'd be no chance of a sounder system ever coming about.'

'Ay, exactly, but you don't know how easily I could be a better one still! I've come to love it all—my grandfather couldn't have loved it more—and to think of my duty to my son, and my stake in the
country. And it’s a grand sturdy old type that’s done a great work for the race. Even old Manningham here, and men in the position of Rotherwood and Ormersfield—I meet him there—wonder if he ever saw any Jack o’ Lanthorns in his youth! And the thing wants thoroughly carrying out from one point of view—an amateur squire is no better than an amateur actor. I could go in for it and do it all right enough.’

‘Well,’ said Clarence, ‘you are cast for the part.’

‘Ay,’ said Alaric, ‘or I should never play it! It’s just the old story—neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red-herring! The squire’s coat doesn’t fit, and the magistrate’s chair’s like a strait-waistcoat! But then, alas! the red cap and red shirt don’t strike me as becoming garments either.’

‘How about the mask and buskins?’ said Clarence, watching him as he spoke.

Alaric flung away his cigarette and sat upright.

‘Clarence, now and then I get a crazy fit. I want to let myself out—give out what’s in me—though Heaven only knows what it is. Claude Melnotte wasn’t quite an ideal form of self-expression, and I haven’t any other. The gilt soon gets knocked off that gingerbread. But—but I’m such a fool, Clarence, that I find myself looking forward all the week to the chance of spouting to the fellows at the club. As if one could set the world to rights in that way!’

‘Is the world especially wrong at present?’ asked Clarence.

‘Yes. You know the contract for the new church was given to a London man, and now he has got that for enlarging the station. Of course he brought a great many strange workmen down with him, besides employing some of our own fellows. They mostly
lodge in that new district out on the heath; and the nearest way to their work is across the park, and through the big copse. Unluckily there's just one bit of wood that belongs to Oakfield, and now Sir James says he'll lock it up—so many fellows going through disturb the game. Perhaps; but it means a couple of extra miles for them. He wants me to lock my gates too. I shall not.'

'Why, even your grandfather never did so.'

'No; but till this new settlement on the heath, and all this building, it made very little difference. Besides, he didn't preserve as the Manninghams do. They might except that outlying copse; but Sir James says it's a principle.'

'You won't be bullied into giving it to him?'

'No; but it does seem confoundedly unneighbourly, especially as I don't shoot myself. Rather the act of an outsider, you know, to go against all their traditions. The Manninghams think I'm currying favour against the next election. I'm trying to persuade the old boy to let it be—as it always has been. I don't believe the workmen do any mischief; of course they might. Some of them are among the lights of my club. There's a north country lad—— By-the-way, his parson, Mr. Merrifield, preaches here on the church-opening in September. He's clever, and we talk things out. Wanted to know last night how I justified myself in holding landed property. I talked to him like a true-blue old Tory—felt like one, too. But I don't know how I could, if I kept it for my own selfish enjoyments, or stood upon my more selfish rights. But what will little Alaric say to me by and by?—that is, if there's any landed property left in his time. I hope there will be. I like to think of
his coming after his forefathers. So much for consistency!

'Well,' said Clarence with a smile, 'you do very well for me. If you hadn't been what you call inconsistent, either you would never have made friends with me, or you would have been just such another as myself. You see more, not less than other people.'

'Oh,' said Alaric, 'if I quite knew what I do see! I may grumble now and again; but when a man's lot has been cast like mine in an earthly Paradise, he can't help thinking of all the others who are shut out, and feeling ashamed of himself.'

'Well,' said Clarence again, 'if every one felt that, I don't suppose it would signify much what side they took in politics. There wouldn't need to be any.'

Alaric laughed.

'That would be kingdom come, indeed,' he said, 'a world without politics. You have the luck to have one thing to do, and to do it, and you won't want anything incompatible with it.'

'If I do, I know I sha'n't get it,' said Clarence grimly. 'What's this, the second post?' Clarence took a letter addressed to himself, while Alaric turned over his own share, and he read, much to his surprise—

'THE WHarf HOUSE, OUSEHAVEN,
23rd August.

'DEAR BURNET—I have just heard from an acquaintance at Clarebridge that the theatre there is in rather low water from trying to maintain a stock company unequal to the demands upon them. Now the lessee wants to engage travelling companies. I have come to two conclusions—first, that the "Wills" would feel
far more independent on their own hook than in other people's houses; and secondly, that we cannot depend on helpers with other claims on their time. I hear that Clarebridge is a lively place, where high-class plays would be popular. I thought, by way of experiment, of taking it for the month of October, and producing "As You Like It," and "Romeo and Juliet," besides some comedies. If you are still free, will you come to me for that time, play the leading parts, and help me to produce the pieces? I believe we can recruit from the late stock company. I am very hopeful as to the success of the "Wills," but I am not such a fool as not to feel our deficiencies, and failure now would be disastrous to us. If you see your way to this plan, write to me naming terms, and giving your ideas on the point. We have one or two small manageable engagements in the neighbourhood in September; but if you could come to Ousehaven we could arrange matters, and then go to Clarebridge and get our company together for rehearsal.—Yours truly,

'LEWIS WILLINGHAM.'

Clarence flushed a deep red as he read this letter through, but before he had turned the page he knew what he should answer. 'What matter,' he thought, 'if he laid up future trouble for himself? And, besides, reality would be a corrective of foolish dreams. Yes—he would do it.'

He tossed the letter to Alaric and said, as indifferently as he could—

'I have nothing better to do; I may as well undertake it. They'll know their ground in a month, and get into a more compact shape.'

'But—is it worth your while to connect yourself
with such an inferior sort of affair?’ said Alaric, surprised.

‘Oh, they have merits. It’s a unique sort of thing, you know. This is a holiday time. I should like to play Romeo again. - I like Sir Lewis. I think I’ll go in for it. I shall be tied for so long to one part at the Planet.’

‘Clarebridge is in the Rotherwood country. It’s a good-sized place,’ said Alaric. ‘I’ve heard that there’s a nice little theatre. But I shouldn’t have thought the “Wills” were up to much from your description.’

‘It all gives experience,’ said Clarence, perhaps not very sorry to see Mrs. Lambourne returning with a little dark-eyed girl and a plump fair boy beside her.

‘What do you think Dick says?’ said Emily, as Alaric seized on his little girl and set her on the table, ‘to say her verses to Cousin Clarence.’ ‘It seems that one of your “Wills o’ the Wisp” visits at Coalham, where his curacy is, one of the young ladies, and there has been a great excitement at her taking to the stage. She seems to be a deluding light, for she has broken the heart of the curate of one of the other churches, and Dick owns to having considered her handsome. The poor young man has broken a blood-vessel or something, all for love of Miss Agnes Willingham, who threw him over in a heartless manner.’

‘Eh, Clarence?’ said Alaric, ‘take care of the bogs. The “Wills o’ the Wisp” are dangerous. If one young man takes to his bed and another is deluded into amateur theatricals by their treacherous magic, the case is serious. You’ll see I shall have to come and pull you out of the quagmire. Now then, Martina, see how you can surprise Cousin Clarence.’

‘Alaric spoils her,’ said Emily, after the little
brown-faced girl had repeated a piece of baby-poetry with the funniest dramatic tone and gesture, winning applause and kisses from father and cousin. ‘I don’t want her to be a “Will o’ the Wisp.”’

Alaric only laughed, and tried vainly to coax the shy boy to a similar display.

‘Or to follow one,’ he said. ‘Quite right, Al; don’t have anything to do with the marsh-fires. There are enough of them already to plague mother.’

Emily smiled at him a little anxiously, and as he moved away with the children, roused Clarence from dreamland, by an entreaty to him not to let Alaric worry himself with impossible ideas which would only disappoint him if he carried them out.

Alaric came back in a moment, having opened his last letter.

‘Sir James will lock his gates this day week,’ he said briefly.

‘There won’t be much good, will there, then, in leaving ours open?’ said his wife, a little timidly.

‘No, dear,’ said Alaric. ‘But I can’t shut them.’

He gave a long sigh and added, ‘I wish I could!’
CHAPTER XV

ALLEN-A-DALE

Clarence underwent some chaff from Alaric as to the 'sisters, the cousins, and the aunts' to whom he was to be introduced at Ousehaven. He took it soberly, and managed to conceal how intensely eager he was to go. He had no time to wonder what impression he might make himself; his whole mind was absorbed in the thought that he should see Juliet again, hear her eager talk, and have a right—yes, a right—to teach her and to advise her, and to protect her from every annoyance that might lie in her chosen path.

He arrived at the Wharf House in the afternoon, when they were all at tea in the garden; and there was a chorus of cordial welcome, a sense, delightful to him, of being received as their fellow-worker, as Lewis took him up to Miss Dorset, saying, 'Here, my dear aunt, is a candle that won't flicker quite as much as the "Wills o' the Wisp."'

'I hope you will all throw your beams as far as you can wish,' said Miss Dorset. 'I am glad to see you, Mr. Burnet, and to know something of the young people's friends.'

'You are very kind,' said Clarence gravely; 'but I ought to thank Sir Lewis for giving me a candlestick for the present.'
'Mr. Burnet,' said Juliet, with her eager appeal, 'you will persuade them all that a theatre is much nicer than a private house, won't you?'

'Hush, Jetty!' said Selva. 'As Mr. Pettifer used to say, "Give us all time to eat and drink." I believe you and Lewis would be content with stage meals and pretence banquets.'

We are not going to have much respite,' said Lewis, 'for we do "Midsummer Night's Dream" at a friend's house next week, and we have been planning and rehearsing for Clarebridge.'

'I have been quite idle,' said Clarence; 'my cousin likes to make me so. He enlarges my mind with novels and newspapers.'

'But don't you miss the acting?' said Juliet. 'I always feel as if I wanted to begin again.'

'I should miss it in a little while, no doubt,' said Clarence; 'but my holidays are few and far between. That I am at liberty now is because an engagement fell through, and because the redecorating of my uncle's theatre has taken longer than he expected.'

'Well, it's been very good luck for us,' said Lewis. 'But,' said Miss Dorset—and the quick-eyed visitor perceived that she was trying to make discoveries in this unknown 'stage-land'—'do you not get very tired of the public life night after night?'

'No,' said Clarence; 'that is our life—we like it.'

'There!' cried Juliet. 'They all say that caring for anything but the actual acting, the actual impersonating, is vanity and frivolity. Now is there not something besides? The—the sense of moving people—no, more than that—contact—a sort of magnetism. Even a poor little part is better than none, if you are
in touch with an audience. It is not vanity; but they don't understand.'

'I should have thought,' said Agnes, as Clarence did not reply for a moment, 'that, if you were a true artist, you would think of nothing but your part.'

'No,' said Clarence; 'I think Miss Juliet is right. Perhaps it is the alloy of the gold; but where it does not exist, where the health and nerves make it impossible, the gold won't stand the strain. An actor must love his audience as well as his part. Besides,' he added, with a sudden flash of his black eyes, 'the material of our art is not only our own personality; it is the hearts and the souls of others.'

Clarence was generally a quiet person in private life; but he was capable of looks and sometimes of words which were memorable, and just now he was full of life to the finger-tips—more than himself.

Miss Dorset experienced a sense of extreme surprise. She gave Clarence a polite little bend of the head, and said, 'I can believe you, Mr. Burnet.' But 'the scheme' began to assume in her mind another aspect. She looked at Agnes's lovely face, at Juliet's glowing eagerness, and began to rake up in her mind the particulars of the romantic story of the Lambourne mésalliance.

'Well,' said Lewis, 'I'm a practical man—a manager should be—so if you have finished tea, and will walk round the garden with me, Burnet, we can discuss matters. Armytage dines with us to-night.'

'Is he included in the Clarebridge scheme, and Buckley also?' asked Clarence, as he complied.

'Armytage, of course. But old Mr. Buckley objects, and I won't encourage George against his desire. What
do you think of his acting? Is it worth a stir? He suits us in many ways.'

'If he would work hard and take what he could get, he might make a living by it. But I shouldn't advise him to throw up any berth he may have already.'

'I'm afraid it's the alloy without the gold,' said Lewis; 'he thinks it's all beer and skittles, and fine society.'

Clarence laughed.

'Is that the result of Hildon Castle?' he said. 'But what are the Clarebridge prospects?'

'Well,' said Lewis, 'a man who has a place near there, spoke to me on the day we left Hildon. It seems that the theatre has been carried on hitherto on very old-fashioned lines, with a stock company and occasional stars, and that it has been the habit of the neighbourhood to patronise it, especially in October, when there are some local races and a ball, and the magnates come in from the country to the hotels. The tradespeople want to keep it up. It seems that they have been in the habit of producing old comedies and melodramas, and now and then Shakespeare. However, it hasn't answered very well, and changes are impending. But Colonel Lincoln says that he thinks something might be made of it for October—that our names would attract, to say nothing of yours. I've had some correspondence, and I think of taking the responsibility and engaging as many of the old company as we want to fill up with. Here are the names and particulars. What do you say?'

'Farquharson? Oh! I know that old fellow,' said Clarence; 'he is a contemporary of my uncle's—very much of the old school. He doesn't go down nowadays in London, but he has the old training, can wear
a costume as if it belonged to him, and fence, and so on. He's a very respectable man, and I think you would find him useful. I don't know much of the other names—but we could see. Those lingering stock companies sometimes get gentlemen who are trying their hands, and sometimes broken-down old stagers, who can get in nowhere else. The men are usually better than the ladies. There's a Miss Farquharson—a nice little girl enough.'

'We should only need one lady occasionally,' said Lewis. 'There's no question that my cousin must play the leading parts. It is my sister's wish that she should do so; but Agnes will play Lady Capulet and Celia, and take any part, not comic, that is vacant. We must arrange all that by and by.'

'Well, Sir Lewis,' said Clarence, 'of course the decision rests with you; but the time will suit me well, and if you decide on taking the theatre, I shall be happy to help you to the best of my power, on the terms I proposed. If you all intend to keep together, it seems the best plan.'

If Clarence had known better the exact state of Sir Lewis Willingham's finances, he might have been more slow to advise the risk; but, though the "Wills" talked of earning their living, it did not occur to him that they had no capital to back them up.

They discussed the details of the scheme a little more closely, and then Lewis was called off to speak to the gardener, and Clarence went back to the house alone. On the lawn he met Agnes, gathering flowers. The two halves of her life seemed to her so far apart that the connection between 'the professional actor,' whom she had so dreaded, and the curate whom she had seen at Coalham, had never struck her till to-day,
when she had leisure to realise Clarence in his own person, and the family likeness struck her for the first time.

She was so shy of the Coalham subject that she would not hazard a remark before her family; but now she asked, with the sort of distant gentleness that often marked her manner, if there was any relationship between them.

'Oh yes,' said Clarence; 'he is my younger brother. He always had a strong bent in that direction; and my cousin Alaric sent him to a theological college. He is at home, at Monks' Warren, now.'

'I suppose,' said Agnes, 'that you did not hear him say if one of the other curates, young Mr. Merrifield, was better. I heard that he was very ill.'

'I did hear something about a Mr. Merrifield coming to preach at Monks' Warren. Mrs. Lambourne spoke of it one day.'

'Oh! that must be his cousin. How strange! Does he know Mr. and Mrs. Lambourne?'

'I don't know,' said Clarence. 'I never heard them mention him before. I believe Dick is very happy at Coalham and likes his work there. What lovely carnations you have! They have not got nearly so many different colours at Monks' Warren.'

'My aunts have had these old-fashioned sorts for a long time. They have quaint names, some of them. This is Ruffling Robin of Westminster, and this the Fair Maid of Kent.'

'I could remember those names,' said Clarence; 'but the Duke of Devonshire or the Princess something, as Mrs. Lambourne calls them, mean nothing.'

'You don't think, then, that a rose by any other name *does* smell as sweet?'
‘No,’ said Clarence, ‘really I don’t think it does.’

He had thought Agnes the stiffest of people, and had wondered at the admiration she excited, and was quite surprised to hear her talk pleasantly.

‘Mr. Burnet,’ she said timidly, ‘I hope you won’t think I am rude; but we have all taken a great interest in Dolph. Do you think that he would be safe if he went on the stage? Wouldn’t it be better if he went into a shop? You know he is just a working boy.’

Clarence smiled, but answered her seriously, ‘You know I can’t think that an objection. I am quite sure that Dolph could earn his living on the stage, and I think he has real talent. As for the safety, it has one advantage—if a boy is alone in a town, it occupies his evenings. Of course, it’s easy enough to find bad company in a theatre; but if a fellow’s a fool, he’ll do that anywhere.’

‘I suppose some managers are more careful than others?’

‘Yes; my uncle will be extremely strict. I could get Dolph looked after.’

‘I have often thought,’ said Agnes, expressing her difficulties to the person she would have supposed most unlikely, ‘if one was asked to act in a bad play——’

‘I should leave that to the Lord Chamberlain myself,’ said Clarence. ‘But, for the matter of that, I have seen the same play so acted as to leave a very different moral impression in different hands.’

‘Surely the drama is the greatest of educators!’ exclaimed Juliet, who had come up while they were talking. ‘Every one must be the better for being moved by noble emotions, “purified by terror and pity,” as the Greeks said.’
There are a great many different emotions stirred up on the stage," said Clarence. 'My cousin says that the beautiful art-angel trails his wings in the dust. But——'

'But you don't agree with him?'

'No,' said Clarence, after a moment. 'I shouldn't think much of the angel if he couldn't fight it out under the conditions of real life. His wings must be seen, even if they do get dirty.'

'Ah,' said Agnes; 'but I understand! It is not that I do not care for the characters in Shakespeare; but I see them better in my mind when I read the play. Every attempt to express them jars and spoils them. Something goes wrong. No one can be like, for instance, Portia.'

'Agnes!' exclaimed Juliet indignantly. 'Shakespeare didn't think so himself. He wrote them to be acted. Why, one never half understands them till one begins to think through them—to be them. Mr. Lambourne couldn't mean that. Mr. Burnet, how can she think so?'

'Why, she is right,' said Clarence, with a thrill in his voice, 'and so are you. As we are artists, we are bound to try to copy the vision; but of course we cannot. The more we try, the more we see it to be hopeless; yet try we must, whatever sort of art it is; and we learn by trying.'

For once Agnes understood him the best, and understood also the saying, which she had always thought rather wicked, that art is a kind of religion. She saw an analogy. Juliet was a little awed. She was but a girl, and her special talent was much more developed than her general powers. She wanted to act parts, not to express passion or beauty.
'Thank you,' said Agnes simply. 'I don't think I shall mind quite so much now.'

'Alaric made me see it so,' said Clarence; 'but the ideal does get pushed into the background. Oh, there is Dolph! What is he doing with that carving knife—rehearsing something at the window?'

'No,' said Agnes laughing; 'he is laying the table and looking at you. He is supposed to help my aunt's butler; but the ideal is too strong for him.'

'May I go and speak to him?'

'Oh yes! Would you like a Ruffling Robin for a buttonhole? They are very sweet.'

'Thank you very much,' said Clarence, taking the flower and sticking it in his coat as he went to greet Dolph, who beamed with delight.

'Jetty,' said Agnes, with some hesitation, 'I have been unfair. I can't see my own way at all; but I ought to confess that Mr. Burnet is not trifling or frivolous.'

'I shouldn't think it mattered about confessing,' said Juliet. 'But any one with eyes can see that.'

After dinner, Lewis, with an apology, asked Clarence if he would allow his Aunt Marian to hear him recite.

'That she may know the best as well as the worst of us,' he said.

'My cousin Alaric recites far better than I do,' said Clarence. 'I find it hard to recollect that I mustn't act the pieces. But what does Miss Dorset like?'

'Something blood-curdling,' said Lewis. 'She never goes to popular entertainments, so "Eugene Aram" would be a novelty to her.'

Clarence shook his head. He leaned a little forward over the table by which he was sitting, and
began to repeat, as if he were relating a real experience, Hood's 'Haunted House.' It did not seem to Miss Dorset as if he took any trouble about it; his very slight gestures and the changes of his face and voice seemed to her accidental and spontaneous; but even Ernley Armitage (who did not regard him as altogether a welcome addition to the 'Wills o' the Wisp') listened spell-bound as he gradually worked up their feelings to the shadowy and suggestive climax of horror.

Miss Dorset asked for another piece, and, after a moment or two, he moved a little more into the light, and gave them Sir Lancelot's account of his search for the San Grail, from Tennyson's Idylls of the King. In the first piece he had only allowed them to think of the haunted house; but now they felt as if Lancelot himself, with his passionate yearning, his sin and his repentance, were telling the tale of the search that was almost successful.

'Ooh,' said Agnes, 'that did not spoil it!'

'It is a piece of Alaric's,' said Clarence. 'He has a set of extracts from the Idylls which make a very pretty entertainment, with appropriate music in between. He is very fond of the poem; but I don't take much to the rest of it. Lancelot is the only person I can quite realise.'

There was a little demur and discussion at this; and Miss Dorset, who was not sure that she liked anything quite so 'intense,' said—

'I suppose Sir Walter is out of fashion.'

'Oh no!' said Clarence.

He started up and came forward and, with much more action, recited, first, 'Young Lochinvar,' and then 'Allen-a-Dale,' so as to delight the aunts and recall their early youth.
It had been a most successful evening; but Juliet went to bed with the discontent and dissatisfaction of the artist overpowering her pleasure and delight. Oh, she was a long way from skill of this sort! Would she ever be so sure of her effects as he? She could have been jealous of the skill and the power. Surely he must think her as little worth acting with as Miss Pettifer!

Juliet herself was growing, and her conceptions of her art must needs grow too.

'Well, Minnie,' said Aunt Anne triumphantly, when the sisters were left alone, 'and what do you think of him?'

'I think that you are none of you as yet in danger of being mistaken for professionals; and I think, Nancy, that there are other bonny black eyes besides Allen-a-Dale's which might be put to a similar use. That's a very remarkable young man.'
CHAPTER XVI

OBERON'S SPELL

The house of Lady Henry Grey, Lady Merrifield's elder sister, was by no means undesirable as a place of rest for a convalescent. She was the widow of a canon, very well off, and just invalid enough herself to feel absolved from everything that did not keep her comfortable and amused; but she was also very kind-hearted, and ready to do anything for any one that did not cost her too much trouble; and likewise intelligent and sympathetic enough to make her a general confidante, especially of young ladies.

Sympathy, except from his mother, was, however, the last thing that Harry Merrifield desired, and he had exacted a promise from his mother that she would say nothing about his troubles, 'a promise perhaps needful, for parents never quite get over the feeling that the affairs of their children are a sort of nursery concern, which they can discuss with their own contemporaries; and his aunt Emily was his mother's old companion-sister, with whom her heart always overflowed.

Lady Henry needed no ulterior cause for her nephew's illness; she was always ready to believe that curates were worked to death, and that the lungs of all her family required special care. Her sister had
something of the like misgiving, for though the Merrifield side of the house was tough and healthy, it was undeniable that her son Harry ‘took after’ in appearance those of her own kindred who had been early cut off; and while he insisted on hurrying back to Coalham as soon as he was strong enough to walk a quarter of a mile, she had obtained an opinion from her sister’s pet doctor that he ought to be carefully watched all the winter, or else sent for a few years to a warmer climate. It was true that Harry denounced the doctor as an old woman, and she was not far removed from the same notion; but she intended to meet her husband in London and get a firstrate opinion before making any more arrangements.

And whatever were Harry’s schemes for the future, he was very languid for the present, and not able for more than a short turn on the esplanade and a drive with his aunt; and thus it was that, while his mother was gone to afternoon tea with some old friends of her military life, he was sitting in one of the easiest of chairs, dreaming over one of his aunt’s Mudie books, and half-listening to the talk going on between her and one of the middle-aged young ladies who were always hovering about the house. When he began to attend, the visitor was reading aloud a letter from a sister, who, it seemed, was staying away from home.

‘We had such a delightful entertainment at Ouseford Hall. I must tell you about it. Theatricals in the open air by the “Wills o’ the Wisp.” I daresay you have heard of them—the Willinghams of Ousehaven. It seems that they were all ruined, as so many people are nowadays; and so they have made their talents available and really act in earnest, in a semi-public way; so Mr. Marsden had them over for
his fête, to perform "Midsummer Night's Dream." It was the loveliest thing I ever saw! Out in the park, you know, with splendid trees shutting in a green mossy glade; and there were two tents in the rear to serve for dressing in. Lady Willingham was Titania: she is the sweetest little darling of a woman you ever saw—all in green, and silvery gauze over it; and she did look so saucy and yet loving when she swept off from Oberon, and so very pretty as she lay asleep. Oberon was very handsome—her young brother-in-law—but he was a little too stiff and proud in his bearing to her and to Puck, for he evidently was disgusted at his fairy costume. Puck was very clever, but not ethereal enough for the other fairies, and was somehow more like a naughty boy than a sprite, though every one said his acting was wonderful, but it wanted the delicate edge that most of the others had; above all, Hermia and Helena, who were the two cousins, the Misses Willingham. Little Hermia was all fire and spirit, and some people admired her most; but to my mind, Helena was the more interesting. She is very lovely; not only a stage-beauty. There was something most pathetic in her pleading with that naughty Hermia, and she was so dignified when Lysander began to pursue her. In point of fact, Lysander is her own real lover, you must know: he is a Mr. Armytage, a naval officer and an Egyptian hero, just recovered from his wound. He is engaged to her, and they are only waiting to be married till these theatrical engagements are fulfilled. He is a fine tall young man, and looked as big as Hercules in his Greek dress. He is well off; and he was apparently not delighted to have the spell removed from his eyes. I forgot to say that a jolly old Irish major was
Bully Bottom, and made himself additionally comical by speaking in a brogue, especially when he addressed the fairies. Most likely it is the last out-of-door performance this season, as the days are closing in. I wish we could get them to act for our Orphan Fund.'

'It must be very trying for those poor girls to act in the open air,' was Lady Henry Grey's comment; 'and the grass is always damp in September. It makes me shiver to think of it; I wonder Mrs. Marsden could think of such a thing.'

'Oh! no doubt she had the dew swept off beforehand.'

There was another arrival of visitors; and when presently Lady Merrifield came home, she found Harry close to the open window in the chill of sunset, with lips firm set and hands clasped over the arms of the chair, in a kind of congealed state.

He said nothing, however, and allowed her to suppose he had been half asleep, while his aunt apologised for not having perceived that the hot day had become cold. There was renewed cough—quite enough to show how needful care was; and he was ordered to bed immediately after dinner. When he had gone upstairs, his aunt mumbled about her regrets at having let him sit under the open window, but she had been taken up with the letter that Minnie Polwarth was reading from her sister, all about some theatricals acted by real ladies and gentlemen—so interesting—a baronet who had been ruined. Perhaps the company might be invited here. Lady Merrifield pricked up her ears, and thought that Harry's collapse might be accounted for.

It was a collapse. Harry was much less well, and was now seized with a desire to leave Brighton and
go home, much to his mother's relief, though she did not fully understand the motive, nor his evident improvement in spirits, till one evening when she was sitting with him in the twilight, he suddenly exclaimed, 'I understand better now! If only she had told me so at once! She was engaged all the time!'

It had certainly done much to take out the sting of the rejection. Though convinced that her Lysander must be a good-for-nothing vain young puppy who wished to show himself off, or else would never have consented to the appearance of his ladylove, and though still auguring a descent like that of the heroine of Locksley Hall, Harry felt far less personally wounded than before.

Still, however, he hankered for extra and vehement work, though his lungs were pronounced to be in no state to bear any strain in an English climate. So, as his married sister in Ceylon had been writing of her clergyman needing a holiday in England, it was decided to send him out to her care.

The voyage was rendered less alarming to his mother's anxiety, since a friend of another aunt, Miss Mohun, was going out to rejoin the Zenana Mission after a rest in England, taking with her a young niece who had just qualified herself for the medical part of the mission. Harry was to regard himself as their escort, while the elder lady undertook to watch over his health.
CHAPTER XVII

A PETTY TYRANT OF THE FIELDS?

When Clarence came back from Ousehaven, he found all the world of Monks' Warren in a state of excitement. A party of young workmen had torn down the gates erected by Sir James Manningham, had been surprised in the process by his keepers, a row had been the natural result, the head keeper had been hurt severely, and two of the aggressors—Joshua Randall, the Coalham lad of whom Alaric had spoken, and a Monks' Warren boy called Tom Furlonger—had disappeared. Clarence was distressed at his cousin's trouble, but just now he found it hard to think about the question, the programme for the Clarebridge theatre and the plans of the "Wills o' the Wisp" filling his mind. He had to meet Sir Lewis to arrange matters once or twice, and the staging of the Clarebridge plays seemed to him of the highest importance. After all, he had undertaken to play Orlando, because the old actor Farquharson fancied himself as Jacques, and it was a rare chance in these days, he said, to gain varied experience.

'Experience be hanged!' Mr. Belville, the actor-uncle, when Clarence went up to see him on business, said. 'You had a great deal better give your mind to Raymond Rivers in "One Soul and Two Faces."' Two
minds 'll never do. You and the author have evolved your conception, as you call it, together, and I hope you'll find it pay. I have my doubts; the public like their heroes all white, and their villains all black, not such infernally "subtle conceptions" as you young men go in for. And now you're not giving your mind to working it out——'

Clarence interposed in a hurry, and vowed that Raymond Rivers was never out of his mind, and Clarebridge made no difference at all. Had not he arranged the bills there on purpose to have three days free before the Clarebridge race week to come up for the final reading and first rehearsing of 'One Soul'? Wasn't it all the world to him?

'It is to me, Clarence—it is to me,' said his uncle nervously. 'A new management, a new play, and a new leading actor, my boy, may well make a man shake in his shoes.'

'It is ten thousand times more to me,' said Clarence passionately. 'Failure would be utter despair!'

Mr. Belville looked at him, and said nothing; while Clarence flushed all over and thought bitterly to himself that, though failure might be despair, he could hardly say that success was hope. But he did hope, or the life-blood could not have beat so hotly within him, he could not have felt so certain of his own powers. He was roused to greater interest in the local politics by a visit from his brother Dick, who joined him as he sat on the terrace, studying, it must be confessed, Orlando, while Alaric was holding one of many vexatious interviews with Sir James Manningham.

The Rev. Richard Burnet possessed in full that delightful independence of family tradition which is congenial to the conscience or to the contradictiousness
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of youth, and to which those of his name were specially addicted. Clarence, however, let his relations, as his mother was wont to say, 'enjoy their own opinions,' knowing that successful sons reconcile parents to much; but Dick liked to instruct and convert them. He was a very good fellow in his way; but he was not made of nearly such fine stuff as his elder brother, and did not get on so well with his squire-cousin, of whose doings he often disapproved, and he had now come up to the Park with a letter in his pocket, as to which he felt it his duty to call Alaric to account.

'I'll give it to him, if you like,' said Clarence. 'Old Manningham's there now.'

'Ah,' said Dick, 'about the same matter, I suppose! You can see it if you like. It's a bad business.'

Clarence took the letter and read:—

'St. Cuthbert's Vicarage, Coalham, September.

'Dear Burnet—I have been greatly concerned to find that the police have been making inquiries here after Joshua Randall, a lad who used to be in my Bible Class, but who went, some months ago, to Monks' Warren, being employed there on a building contract. It seems that he has got into some trouble as to trespassing, and that there is a warrant out against him. His friends heard a month or two ago, from some connections in the place, that he had not been going on well, and that he had joined some club where he picked up theories of a socialistic tendency. I wrote to the lad, but received no answer. As you probably know, I am coming to Monks' Warren on the 17th, to preach the evening sermon at the opening of Mr. Walton's Mission Church; but now my cousin is
ill, I cannot spare the time to get there before the afternoon of that day. If you could find out a little how the land lies, I might perhaps do something to soften matters for the poor fellow. Is your cousin, Mr. Lambourne, likely to take a very severe view? —Sincerely yours, ‘DAVID MERRIFIELD.’

‘Severe view!’ said Clarence. ‘Why, Alaric has been breaking his heart over that fellow ever since he went off.’

‘Yes,’ said Dick. ‘But this is the point, don’t you see, that it is at Alaric’s club that he has picked up these dangerous notions, after Mr. Merrifield, had taken such pains with him?’

‘I’ll be bound his notions would have been a good deal worse if Alaric hadn’t got hold of him. Has this parson—he’s not your boss, is he?—the wit to understand that, do you suppose?’

‘Mr. David Merrifield is a most devoted worker,’ said Dick. ‘I shouldn’t call him an eloquent man, but the Canon thinks highly of him. He doesn’t, in my opinion, think quite enough of attracting the young and ignorant, and some of his workers find him unsympathetic. His services want style. A lady worker of his told me that he refused a banner of St. ———’

‘Oh! hang up the banner on the outward wall—or anywhere else,’ interrupted Clarence impatiently. ‘People shouldn’t gossip about their own company and managers to outsiders. That has nothing to do with it. But Alaric has been worried enough about that young fool already, and I hope no one else is coming to be down upon him. Hush! there he is—looking bothered to death. He’s a long way too nervous and sensitive for this sort of work.’
Alaric came out at the open library window, and nodding to Dick, looked over Clarence's shoulder at the book still open in his hand.

'How are you getting on with Orlando?' he said. 'And why have you got Rosalind all marked up in your book?'

'Oh, I have to look up the staging of the whole affair, you know!' said Clarence; but Dick broke in with some importance in his manner.

'Here's a message for you, Alaric, from Mr. Merrifield,' he said, as he gave him the letter.

'Yes,' said Alaric briefly; 'I know Randall came from those parts. I have written already to Mr. Merrifield. Do you stay over the 17th, Dick?'

'Yes; I go back the day after. I am to read the second lesson.'

'Oh yes; quite right,' said Alaric, rather dreamily; and, though Dick would have liked to hear him defend himself, somehow he was a little bit afraid of his gentle, soft-voiced cousin and presently took his departure. Then Alaric said—

'I shall never rest till I know what has become of those young idiots.'

'What did that old sinner want with you to-day?'

'Well,' said Alaric, with a half smile, 'he wanted to impress on me that, if I had not let people think my woods and my park were public property, no one would have thought it a hardship to be shut out of his. That's true, you know. Then he said that, as the men had shown themselves unfit for the privilege, the least I could do was to lock them out now, as otherwise it would be impossible to protect his property. There's something in that.'

'What did you say?' asked Clarence curiously.
I said that I knew tearing down the gates had only been the act of a few, and I thought that, if I made a path and a stile down by the old ice-house, they could get out into the road without crossing Oakfield.'

'Wasn't he content then?'

'Not at all. He said I was making it impossible for gentlemen to live in the country; and that he would have stood by me, shoulder to shoulder, in any such difficulty. So he would. He said—oh, well, he thinks I am a traitor!'

Alaric took the book out of Clarence's hand, and, half mechanically, began to pencil emphasis marks and annotations against Orlando's lines while he spoke. 'I wonder;' he went on, 'from what depths of human nature class-feeling springs. It's about the strongest thing out.'

'Quite insuperable, I suppose,' said Clarence gloomily.

'It dies very hard,' said Alaric, 'even if passion ignores it for a time. Of course its action is modified by religion; but the instinct is never rooted out.'

'Classes had better avoid each other then, or swallow each other, like the crocodile and the catawampus.'

'No!' said Alaric, with sudden force. 'It's the devil's own work, and we've got to resist it both ways.' He added, with a laugh, 'You see, I get blows from both parties. Sir James is a good old fellow in his way; and Randall was a fine lad, with more stuff in him than we often find in the south. How he did enjoy Shakespeare, and read it too, in his northern Doric! And here he goes and smashes other people's gate-posts for an argument.'

'It's rather a telling one,' said Clarence; 'and besides, no doubt it was a considerable lark.'
'Ah! The British squire can't see that point of view. No, no; that's beyond even me. Well, art is free. Orlando was a very bad match for Rosalind.'

'Orlando was a gentleman,' said Clarence; 'I suppose he had heaps of quarterings. It's not a case in point.'

'You must touch all the scenes with Ganymede very lightly,' said Alaric. 'It's very hard to feel that he didn't know the boy was Rosalind. Don't be too serious.'

'Most likely I shall.'

'Ah! wish I'd the chance!' He mused for a moment or two and then said, with a sudden change—

'I'm going to the club to-night. Nobody will be in tune for Shakespeare. I shall try and talk the matter right out.'

'Do,' said Clarence; 'but don't worry yourself to death over it first.'

'Oh no!' answered his cousin. 'When a man has such personal good luck as I have, the difficulty is to worry enough about other people.'

'Well, I have never known you find it difficult to worry yourself yet,' said Clarence. 'Come, now, coach me up in Orlando. I've no original ideas about him.'

Alaric sat down by his side, and the wistful look went out of his eyes, as he recalled his conception of the part, and soon springing to his feet, began to show Clarence how he thought it should be given. Like many nervous and excitable people, he got through life by his power of forgetting himself in the interest of the moment.

Clarence gave his whole mind to his business; but he never forgot for one moment that, in undertaking it, he was laying up future misery for himself.
CHAPTER XVIII

FELLOW FEELING

It so fell out that the day of the church opening coincided with a request from Sir Lewis Willingham to Clarence to meet him at Clarebridge, to make arrangements and see what wanted to be done. Clarence was not given to ecclesiastical ceremonies, and moreover had never quite divested himself of an idea that going to church at Monks' Warren looked like a display of his position at the great house, and was in fact in rather bad taste, considering his father's opinions. Nor was he fond of the sort of gathering which such an occasion brought to the Park, so that he agreed willingly to Sir Lewis's proposal.

His scruples as to his family were proved to be over fine, as he found that all, except the old gentleman himself, were determined to go to the new church in the evening to hear Dick read the lesson, of which distinction they were extremely proud, and Clarence, perceiving that his brother was anxious for his opinion on his voice and delivery, agreed to come back by a train which would bring him in time to attend the service.

He did his business with Sir Lewis, had the inestimable privilege of hearing Juliet's name mentioned at least three times, in connection with the
parts she had undertaken, and was, as he sat in the corner of a crowded compartment of the train, endeavouring to extract, from this scanty source, all the information about her which her cousin had not given him; when some miles from Warrenstoke the train came to a standstill with a sudden crash and shock, which threw all the people in the carriage pell-mell against each other—the women shrieked, there was a moment of sickening fear, then the carriage settled into its place, and the train was suddenly stopped.

'A collision—we're all right,' said Clarence; 'a coal truck or something.' He looked out at the window, then opened the door and jumped out.

'Come on,' he said to a man opposite him, 'the ladies had better sit still. We are all right.'

All the passengers were, however, by this time out on the bank, and as Clarence ran on to the front of the train, he perceived that it had run up to the wrong platform of Lindenhurst station and dashed into an excursion train, waiting there till the line should be clear. The engine and tender were in ruins, and two carriages at the end overturned, and unhappily, the excursionists, returning from a favourite place on the coast, had been waiting inside them. Fearful sounds and sights met his eyes and ears—the little country station was wild with excitement and alarm—and he went at once to help in the work of rescue, finding himself side by side with a strong sturdily-made man in his shirt sleeves, who was already endeavouring to open the door of the first carriage and help out the struggling shrieking mass of human beings within. Clarence, with others, lent all the aid in his power, finding himself obeying the directions of his companion, who had both presence of mind and common
sense. Matters were not quite so bad as might have been; a great many passengers were released unhurt or with slight injuries, only one or two were lifted out insensible, crushed and injured, as Clarence had never seen the human form before. One man still lay against the lower window of the overturned carriage, wedged in by the broken spars and other débris of the roof and sides.

‘Mind you don’t pull it over on our heads, sir,’ cried a navvy who had been travelling in the down train, and had rendered effective help in the rescue.

‘Show us the safest way, we’ll follow your directions,’ said the stranger.

It was a very difficult and risky business, and as Clarence also followed the navvy’s orders, he saw his companion set his back against the quivering, shaking side of the carriage, and literally hold it up while the injured man was dragged out at the opening thus preserved. Clarence helped to hold back the falling spars, and as he pulled the stranger out on to the platform he exclaimed breathlessly—

‘I say, that was a bold act of yours, sir, it might have crushed you.’

‘I am very strong—it seemed the best way. Is the poor fellow alive?’ going over to him and kneeling down by his side.

The young man was alive, though with one arm frightfully crushed; and as the blood and dust were washed from his face, Clarence gave a start of recognition, as did a porter who was holding him.

‘Mercy upon us, it’s that there young Furlonger. Bless me, do you suppose Randall is here too, Mr. Burnet?’

The injured man opened his eyes, gave a violent
start, and tried to wrench himself out of the porter's arms.

'Keep quiet my man, nobody's going to hurt you,' said the stranger. 'Are you looking for your friend.'

'He's not here—you won't nab him,' said Furlonger fiercely; but at this moment a little special train rattled in from Warrenstoke, a gentleman jumped off it, saying, 'I am a doctor,' and took possession of the wounded man, who had again fainted.

He speedily declared that the lad's injuries, though dangerous, were not mortal, and that he must be taken to the Warrenstoke hospital at once, as well as three others of the passengers. The stoker and the engine driver were killed, and after all possible help had been given, Clarence found himself standing on the platform, under the fair September moon with the last glow of sunset dying down in the distance, and the flaring lights of the station close at hand.

'We have to give thanks for a great deliverance,' said the stranger, taking off his hat and wiping his brow. 'Is it possible, can I get on to Monks' Warren? I am due there.'

'Are you the preacher?' said Clarence. Mr. Merrifield—I—yes, I haven't an idea of the time.' He spoke confusedly, and Mr. Merrifield saw that he was extremely pale.

'You are not hurt? You are overdone—rest a minute,' he said, taking him by the arm and drawing him back to a bench.

'No—I—it came over me—I never saw such a sight. It's nothing, sir, thank you. I was only dizzy for a moment,' said Clarence, who, strong as he was, had the sensitiveness of his artist nature, and who was all unused to scenes of horror.
'I have been in a colliery accident,' said Mr. Merrifield gravely, 'but nothing can make such a scene otherwise than awful. It is seven o'clock.'

If we can get a trap we might do it across country,' said Clarence, 'that is, in time for the sermon; and though there must be plenty of clergymen there, and I suppose one of them could take your part—preach I mean, I should be glad to get back. My cousin will be on the lookout for you, and hear of this accident, and he will be terribly frightened—my brother too.'

Mr. Merrifield evidently felt that if it lay in his power, he ought to be in Monks' Warren new church at the hour named, and Clarence, who would have felt exactly the same had his own professional engagements been in question, proceeded to inquire for the trap, as the trains would not have taken them in time.

Means of removing the traces of the adventure were provided them; Mr. Merrifield's bag turned up in the carriage which he had left, and his long coat where he had thrown it on the platform. He now appeared as an unmistakable cleric, with a sensible individual face which took Clarence's fancy, and after a telegram had been despatched to Alaric in the hope that it might shorten the period of wonder as to the preacher's non-arrival, or of alarm as to the accident, he proceeded to drive him across country in a trap from the Lindenhurst inn, by the shortest way to Monks' Warren. On the way Clarence identified himself as the brother of Canon Wharton's curate, and the recognition of Furlonger led to all the story of the trespassing fray, which Clarence told from Alaric's point of view. Mr. Merrifield seemed to be a man of few words.

'My family do not preserve in the modern thorough
fashion,' he said. 'These foolish lads seem to have had a grievance.'

'It will be a great relief to my cousin to find even one of them.'

'Ah yes. It seems that there is a great opportunity in his hands—work of an unusual kind.'

'He is an unusual person,' said Clarence briefly.

There was a silence, and presently, as they neared Monks' Warren, Mr. Merrifield said in rather a shy, tentative fashion—

'I think I have understood—or seen in the paper—that you have been professionally engaged with Sir Lewis Willingham and his family lately?'

'Yes,' said Clarence, 'and I am going to form part of his company at the Clarebridge theatre.'

'At the theatre! I thought—I thought his scheme was confined to acting among friends?'

'Why—he did not find that practicable, and, with the theatre in his own hands, he will be more independent.'

'Is he—are his family likely to be successful in the undertaking. I am acquainted with one of his sisters at Coalham.'

'It is a very difficult undertaking,' said Clarence cautiously.

'And, pardon me, is it not rather trying for young ladies who are unaccustomed to—to—' David Merrifield hesitated for a word, and finally said, 'public life?'

There was something in the tone of the grave clergyman's voice, and something in the face on which the moonlight shone, that told the keen-eyed Clarence a little of his story.

'There's a great deal,' he said. 'Of course I can't
judge what the social difference may be between taking
the theatre and acting at private houses; but I should
think it would be far pleasanter for the young ladies,
as Sir Lewis is manager and will have it in his own
hands.' Another silence, and then,
'The young ladies enjoy the amusement?' said David.
'Miss Juliet Willingham is the most of an actress,'
said Clarence, 'but Miss Willingham's beauty, which
is of a kind to tell at a distance, and the sweetness of
her voice makes her a valuable member of the company.
She is, perhaps, rather shy.'
A few more remarks passed, and it struck neither
clergyman nor actor that it was odd to discuss this
subject after the exciting scene through which they had
passed. It was nearly as exciting to them both.
As they came up to the raw, new brick building,
Mr. Merrifield said, with a touch on his companion's
arm, 'I should like to feel that we gave thanks for our
safety together; but I believe that you ought to go
home and rest.'
'Oh no. I am coming to church,' said Clarence.
As he spoke, the sound of their wheels was heard,
and out rushed Alaric and two or three other gentle-
men.
'Here you are—safe? We did not hear of the
accident till some one brought word after the service
began. They said no one was hurt in the down train.'
He had grasped Clarence's hands so eagerly that
he had hardly attention to spare for Mr. Merrifield,
who was taken round to the vestry after a few hurried
explanations, among which it appeared that the tele-
gram had not arrived. While the anthem was being
sung, Clarence went in and sat by Alaric's side at the
bottom of the church. He saw his mother and sisters,
unconscious of any alarm, some way in front of him, and Dick, with his dark face becomingly set off by his surplice and stole, in the chancel. Emily, from a seat higher up, glanced back as Mr. Merrifield slipped into his place, and smiled as she saw that Clarence was there too. Some communication passed among the clergy, and ‘thanks for deliverance from great danger for some members of the congregation’ were given in the general thanksgiving. The sermon, when it came, was simple, straightforward, and well delivered. It spoke of the presence of God in that place, and in all other places, however unlike this one with its holy peace and calm. The preacher did not make any sensational allusions to startle his hearers, but as he spoke of trouble, danger, and adversity, all who knew what had passed that evening could apply it for themselves. Clarence recalled the steady resolute face that the speaker had worn when he had risked his life to save Furlonger, and with what quiet recollectedness he had done it, and he felt that the mouth spoke out of the abundance of the heart. His life had set him much apart from the externals of religion; perhaps he erred by distrusting and despising them; but a certain reverence lurked in his dislike of professions, which he had seen in early life made without much regard to practice, and combined with teaching which he could not accept. He had the nature that looks up and worships, and a constant love of the nobler part. He did not forget Mr. Merrifield's words, and the jubilant music that succeeded to the sermon chimed in with his feelings. As he stood up, a hand was put forward from behind him to reach a hymn book. He glanced round, and to his intense surprise saw a tall, white head and brilliant black eyes—his father's, who, as the.
service ended and they came out of church, grasped his hand.

'This is not a precedent—not a precedent, Clarence,' he said; 'but I heard of the railway accident, and couldn't hear if you were safe; so I looked in to inquire of the pew opener, and saw you. And after all a place of worship is a place of worship, and that was a Gospel sermon—and, my dear boy, I was glad to thank God for your deliverance from destruction. Though it is not a precedent.'

'Come up to supper, Uncle Philip,' said Alaric, 'and make sure that he is all right.'

Dick Burnet could not help glancing at his Coalham fellow-worker and wondering what he thought of the party round that supper-table. Possibly David Merrifield thought it a remarkable one, especially when old Mr. Burnet recovered his spirits and talked in the fine, rolling, vibrating voice with which his younger son intoned the litany at Coalham Church. Somehow every one seemed to fit in. Mrs. Lambourne was the kindest and most tactful of hostesses, but it seemed to David that the influence that harmonised all the various elements came from the delicate-looking, dark-eyed Alaric, whose kinship to his gipsy-faced cousins was shown as plainly as his innate refinement and grace. Mr. Merrifield did not find it hard to believe that he was an 'unusual person.'

They went over to Warrenstoke together on the next morning to see Furlonger in the hospital.

They found the lad likely to do well, but did not otherwise get much satisfaction out of their visit. Whatever Furlonger's previous relations to Mr. Lambourne might have been, the sense of being in disgrace reduced him to the sulky village boy before
an offended superior. He touched his forehead with the forefinger of his uninjured hand, and said nothing but 'No, sir,' to every question about the lost Randall; which, as they had not the power to promise pardon in case of his return, was not perhaps surprising. Alaric felt sure that the natural distrust had surged back again over his scholar, and felt sore-hearted in consequence. But both he and David knew very well that the first and last resource of rustic caution is dumbness.
CHAPTER XIX

DOUCE DAVIE

When he parted from Alaric Lambourne, David Merrifield went to finish his holiday at his home. In due time, he was landed at the tiny station, scarcely more than a house and two platforms, beside one of which he already saw the basket-carriage and dark-tinted donkey soberly standing, and his sister Elizabeth on the platform, among the car-boys and milk-tins.

'You are all right, Davie!' was her hurried exclamation.

'Perfectly right,' he answered, and the next moment had to answer the same query put in longer words by the lugubrious looking station-master.

'I hope you feel yourself uninjured by the accident, sir?'

'Oh yes, thank you, Mr. Smith.'

'There is no knowing, sir,' proceeds the gold-banded official. 'Now I knew an individual who thought himself entirely unhurt, but who finally suffered from creeping paralysis.'

'No fear of that for me, thank you, Mr. Smith,' said David, 'for our train was the guilty one running into an excursion train.'

'Ah! those excursions,' sighed the station-master, shaking his head as if they were a weight on his mind.
'Are they most of a blessing or the reverse?' said Elizabeth, 'Oh, take the reins, Davie. Peter Bell nearly made me too late; he won't go except for Susan and mankind in general. Certainly he is one sort of reverse of an excursion train, such as apparently was the bane of poor Harry.'

'Apparently,' repeated David.

'Have you heard from him?'

'Yes, from Gibraltar. Chiefly about the lady doctor's advice as to disposing of the child with a spine in our hospital. Poor Harry, he is a good fellow, and will come home a man! All at home well?'

'Quite well, my mother better than usual. She would have come for you, but that Peter is too much for her single-handed, and might stand still altogether. Here is a letter or two sent on for you.'

David opened the letters, while she let 'the silent ass' creep on between the high green banks of the lane. Presently, with a sort of gasp, he uttered the word, 'There!'

'What?'

'Did you know that the old Rector of Beechcroft was dead?'

'No! Has Mr. Mohun offered the living to you?'

'Indeed he has, and pretty promptly too; I suppose to save himself from the swarms of applicants.'

'Well?'

'I think you can guess. Subject of course to considerations.'

'Of what kind?'

'Such wishes of my father as would render it matter of obedience—but that I do not expect.'

'I should have been more doubtful of your decision a few months ago.'
'As how?' said David.

'Well, if the truth must be told, I thought there was attraction enough to make you overcome your modern cleric's contempt for a wholesome country parish.'

'Far be it from me to despise a country parish and its good old solidity and loyalty,' ejaculated David. 'As you say, four or five months ago, I might have thought more over the matter, but as things stand, it would be base in me to stand in Harry's light.'

'In Harry's? I had drawn my conclusions that he had had his congé, and perhaps a good thing too.'

'I am not so sure of that. Besides, the poor fellow managed his affairs ill, grotesquely ill. There's no other word for it, and he ought to have a second chance.'

'Well, I am sure whatever poor Agnes Willingham is dragged into, is against her will, and yielded to from the highest motives.'

'You think so?' exclaimed David, his face lighting up.

'I cannot doubt from the talk I had with her in the train.'

'Did she know what was expected of her.'

'Not all these professional theatricals, but it was of acting in general that she talked to me, and I could not condemn it altogether as mamma and Susan would.'

'Then she really had a sort of sanction from you?'

'That's a strong word. I told her exactly what I thought, not guessing that more was involved than mere amateur performances.'

'It all depends on what they have made of her!'
said David. 'And for my part, I don't believe they could do her much harm. I met a man at Monks' Warren who has been acting with them, a professional, a cousin of Mr. Lambourne, quite a different being from what one imagines a player, and I gathered from him that—that—in short, it is compulsion, complaisance, whatever you may choose to call it. Now, if so, Harry ought to have another opportunity of saving her from it.'

'What would the patron say?'

'That's all nonsense. If she is such as we have known her, and as I firmly believe she is, her having acted a few times in public with her brother and his family can make no difference, unless they are absolute fools. They ought to go down on their knees with thankfulness at getting hold of such a person.'

'But supposing Harry to be out of the question—'

'Even so,' replied David, 'I should have very great doubts. As I understand the place, it is fit for a man needing time for study, or a delicate man, or a wearing-out man, and ought to be left for the like. Now I don't see anything like that in myself, and I could not willingly give up my work at Coalham.'

Elizabeth knew that 'not willingly' meant a great deal more than the mere sound conveyed. 'Well,' she said, 'perhaps I shall soon see what it is like!'

'You!'

'Long ago, to please the cousins, I made a stupid ballad on the old story they had imbibed from their relations in that quarter. Don't you know—about the Devereuxes and the Mayor of Raynham? The prosperity of the town, and the fortunes of the Devereux family date from an adventure in Queen
Elizabeth's reign of the first Devereux and a Raynham youth called Miles Rowden. As the present Mayor of Raynham is a descendant of this Miles, and the tercentenary falls this year, they are going to have some great festivities, and Lady Rotherwood has asked me to go to hear my ballad recited in the intervals of Elizabethan Tableaux.'

'Are you going?'

'I believe so. Mamma seems to wish it, and the Jasper Merrifields are sure to be there, besides old London acquaintances; I shall like a dive into the society of my fellow creatures. But as to the Beechcroft living, I suppose you will settle the matter at once, without waiting to hear more about the place, or whether there's the promise of a railway colony, or anything to make it a good hard-working mission?'

'I think not. It is not fair towards either patron or people not to settle such things at once, and there must be some delay in reaching Harry.'

'Surely Harry is too young for the down pillow you believe the place to be?'

'I have always had my doubts whether Harry is made of the stuff for tough work in a town, and such a shock to his health as he has had is not likely to mend matters in that respect. For every reason, Bessie, he ought to have the refusal, and unless my father feels very strongly to the contrary, he shall have it.'

'Papa scarcely will,' said Bessie.

Therewith they emerged into the old-fashioned village, looking as it might have done two hundred years ago, with the open village green, and the church in the midst of the shady yard. Yet David's eye detected instantly the clearing away of a few shrubs,
and the growth of a red cottage or two, ere they turned up the long elm-shaded lane that led to the home—that would always be the home of homes to him and to his sister, and which still had the essentials of home, the two parents both on the stone steps, with the dear, half-motherly elder sister.

The possession of such a nest continues the youth of the heart, and prevents the yearning for home ties, especially in men who have been accustomed to spend their time of action away from it, even in their earliest boyhood, and who know it is always open to them.

Thus David Merrifield seemed to feel it, during the few days that he could spend at Stokesley. He and his father were perfectly happy together, in that sort of bliss which is enhanced by being of short duration, and therefore to be savouré to the utmost. The Admiral did not too often get a son to be his companion in these days, and together they studied every cow in the fields, every pig in the sty, and inspected every new building, or discussed the need of repair, and prospects of each crop with their faithful Purday, now too old for anything but pottering about, directing the younger men, and declaring that nobody could or would work as in old times, nor hear a word of reproof—all along of they schools that Miss Susan and Miss Bessie was always arter.'

'Master Davie' had many an old friend to visit in the parish, and was so entirely acceptable and at his ease there, that to the minds of mother and sisters it seemed as though such were the sphere he was born for, and as if, since he could not be Rector of Stokesley, he ought to be in as similar a place as possible. At least so thought Mrs. Merrifield and Susan, and they believed it almost a mistaken sacrifice of himself and
his life to a 'horrid town parish,' but Elizabeth could not quite join them. She had the faculty of looking higher, and moreover, better knew what the real sacrifice was, though even with her it was half surmise.

The Admiral took just the view that might have been expected. 'I must say it is a great compliment to you, Davie, but, as you say, Harry is Mohun's own nephew, and ought to come first, since he is in Holy Orders. It would have been a snug berth for you, but you are quite right in not looking out for the like yet. You would feel it like commanding in harbour instead of going into action in a line-of-battle ship! Eh! And you are in the right. Only remember, you lads—clergy though you be—fall in love like other folk, and then you may be sorry you threw away a good offer.'

'I am not likely,' said David.

'You've not been making any of those ridiculous vows, just made to be broken,' said his father anxiously.

'Certainly not, sir,' said David, flushing a little, however.

'Ah! she's not come, that's all,' said the Admiral, smiling sagaciously.

David coloured a little more, and, catching a certain knowing look, he laughed, and added, 'You don't want me to make provision for any possible or improbable she.'

'Well, wiser men have done so, and been glad of it when she came.'

'But as there is no likelihood of her coming,' said David gravely, 'and, indeed, if she should, she must conform to my present condition, there is no need to accept this provision for her.'

And so it ended outwardly; but not even Bessie
fathomed under that calm, cheerful, impassive exterior how strong the strain had been to keep up the spirit of self-dedication, soul and body, and to crush the yearnings of the nature towards affection and repose.

Mr. Mohun's reply to David's refusal showed him a little hurt and disappointed at the 'preference of the modern clergy for large towns where they became better known, and their lights were less hidden,' and he said that he was quite prepared to meet the like objections from his nephew.

Thus it was plain that a letter was gone in quest of Harry, and as to the unjust judgment of David's motives, he took it as a matter of course, and only good Susan said, 'I am sure' twenty times over.
CHAPTER XX

NO ENCUMBRANCES

On the occasion when Lewis had gone with Clarence Burnet to reconnoitre, and engage lodgings at Clarebridge, the party at home waited eagerly for his return, which did not take place till eight o'clock in the evening, when they all sat round during his meal devouring his intelligence.

'A very decent theatre,' he said. 'A little fusty, but good for the voice. Burnet says it is quite up to the common run. There's a tradition that Garrick acted in it, and they show the wig he wore in Hamlet. But the scenery is beastly, there's no other word for it. We must tinker some of it up, and get the rest from town.'

'Will not that be very expensive?' asked Miss Dorset.

Lewis shrugged his shoulders. 'We must go the whole animal if we are to do anything,' he said. 'There's a permanent staff up to the ways of it, and Buckley is a dab at such things.'

'Yes, but he will kick if you make him nothing but a stage carpenter,' said Aunt Anne. 'Besides, his father does not half like it.'

'No,' said Juliet, 'he looked as black as thunder at me when I met him in the High Street.'

'Oh! I've settled him,' returned Lewis; 'I've
promised to look after the tender infant as if I were the heaviest of fathers.'

'And where are we to be?' asked Selva.

'Burnet warned me that actors are not popular lodgers among the steady-going Philistines—keep them up too late, etc.—and so I found it. No tolerable place would have a word to say to us, and after all there is rather a lot of us.'

'Baby and all,' said Selva.

'Baby! You don't want to take the kid. Bring him out in the Christmas Carol, eh?'

'I told you we must take him. O Lewis, don't you remember?'

'We can't then. If you wouldn't all make such a row (N.B. Nobody was speaking but Selva) I'd explain it. Burnet said we had better look for a furnished house, and we went to the agent, who told us he had hit on the very thing—a Quaker tailor's suburban house, if you please. The old fellow always takes his wife and family away out of the wicked doings of the race week to the seaside, but has no objection to turning a penny by letting his abode. It is only ten minutes' walk to our shop, and all roses and Quaker prettiness and primness. It will just hold ourselves and Buckley. Burnet will fend for himself, and the Major and Armytage will find very good quarters at the hotel where we slept.'

'George Buckley!' said two or three voices, in different tones of distaste.

'Can't be helped,' said Lewis. 'I promised his father to keep him out of mischief, and I can't answer for him unless I give him bed and board and ropes of sand to twist if there's nothing else for him to do; but there's no fear of that.'
'And is there a nursery?' said Selva.
'My dear Sally, haven't I told you it is out of the question to take the boy?'
'Then you won't take me,' said Selva.
Lewis made a face, but was wise man enough to defer the discussion, and when Juliet exclaimed, 'Selva, how can you be so unreasonable?' he quashed the argument by saying—
'The great swell of the county is Lord Rotherwood. There's something coming off in those diggings.'
'I should not expect that family to have much to do with races or theatricals,' observed Miss Anne.
'No; they hold aloof from such vanities,' said Lewis. 'But there's some centenary, or stuff like that in hand, and we might get a job there.'
'No more staying in people's houses!' was the general cry, in which Agnes was this time foremost.
'Never fear. These are quite a different cut from the recent snobs. If they meddle with us at all they will behave,' said Lewis. 'I fancy they are some connection of your beloved Merrifields.'
'Don't Lewis!' cried Juliet, refraining with difficulty from quoting the line about the eloquent blood which mantles in her cheeks; but she had said enough to bring his eyes upon Agnes, who was very glad that Aunt Minnie began to move.
'Leaving him and Selva to fight it out,' said Juliet.
'How can she be so foolish!'
In which opinion the aunts perfectly agreed, though Aunt Minnie observed that it was the way with all young mothers who were good for anything, and Aunt Anne that, though the boy might be troublesome, her little ladyship would be of no use if she were fretting after him.
Lewis and Selva were in full contest, standing, as people do on such occasions, in the most inconvenient place, each with back against a shutter of the deep window of the hall, hindering the closing up of the house and conveying to the sharp eyes and ears of Dolph the impression that Sir Lewis and her ladyship were studying Antipholis and Adriana in earnest.

'How can you be so unreasonable, Selva?'

'Unreasonable, indeed, to refuse to leave my darling, darling boy to strangers for a whole month.'

'Strangers! To nurse and Aunt Minnie.'

'An old maid. As if she knew anything about babies!' scornfully exclaimed Selva. 'I'll tell you what she did, Lewis.'

'Well, what?' for the tones were impressively tragic.

'She wanted to give him rusks instead of Infant's Food. Nasty rusks! Oh, you may laugh! Fathers are always horrid unfeeling brutes. Poor little babies have only their mothers to care for them.'

'Well, she hasn't poisoned him yet,' said Lewis, recovering his gravity with difficulty. 'And, besides, you can give your own orders. I should have thought, for my part, brute as I am, that he was much better in the great airy rooms upstairs than squeezed up in a little den where he may catch anything in the world.'

'There are measles at North End.'

'Half a mile off at least. Now listen, Selva, and have a little sense. I am sure I am the last person in the world to wish you to neglect the child; I hate the sort of woman who does so. But I want you to understand the fix I am in. That idiotical young Buckley picked up bad tastes among those Pettifer snobs. His father spoke to me about it, and I have given my word to look after him and keep him as one
of the family; and how is that to be done unless he is in the house? Don't you see? Well, houses are scarce at Clarebridge. It was a rare stroke of good luck that I got this one, and there's only just room for us in it, with Buckley; and if you insist on taking the child he will have to be screwed up in a little bit of a bachelor's room. And what becomes of Buckley?"

'Yes, you prefer him to your own child,' pouted Selva, now thoroughly in a naughty fit.

'How can you talk such rot, Selva? Don't you see that if that baby does eat ruskins or rusks or whatever you call them, it is not quite so serious as a young man's taking to billiards and poker and all that sort of thing.'

'I only know,' said Selva tearfully, 'that I made up my mind that I would never sacrifice my boy to all this theatrical business; no, not if you were all to go down on your knees to me. Going out for a night or two is a different thing, but to take a house and leave him behind for a whole month is what I will never consent to. If I did so once there would be no end to it. So you must choose between Mr. George Buckley and me! That's my ultimatum!'

'You seem to forget——' began Lewis, but she was on her way upstairs, and to call out anything that sounded like authority was against his instincts. So while she went to her baby, he went to his pipe, and neither appeared again in public all the evening. In their two years of wedded life, they had never so nearly quarrelled, and each felt uncomfortably angered, and quite sure that the other was in the wrong, not to say absurd.

Selva had gone to keep guard while the nurse was at supper. With hot tears in her eyes, she stood
looking at her rosy sleeping boy, then threw herself on him and kissed him with 'And did his daddy want to leave him behind for the sake of a horrid smoking stupid man? My boy, my beauty, his mammy's jewel!'

As might have been expected, the little fellow stirred, half-opened his blue eyes, and put out a fat little hand to his mother's cheeks. As if it had been an inspiration, she snatched him up in his white night-gown, threw a shawl over him, and ran downstairs with him in her arms, to the study where sat Lewis, enveloped in smoke, trying to turn his attention to his part, and to feel resolute not to sacrifice George Buckley's morals to his wife's ridiculous fancies, yet with certain qualms which foreboded that this might become an extremely uncomfortable proceeding, and that, after all, it was better to have a woman too motherly than too unmotherly.

So when the door opened and disclosed Selva, with beautiful eyes, still liquid, and sweet mouth trembling into a smile, with the flaxen-haired rosebud creature half awake, but soothed and happy on her bosom, there was a pleased and softened look to meet her, as she held the child to him, saying, 'Isn't he a darling?'

'A jolly little chap,' returned the young father, kissing them both, chiefly conscious of satisfaction that Selva's ill-humour was appeased.

'And look here,' she said, 'if you will only let me take him, I'll manage somehow! You great stupid men have no notion how to manage, and think bedrooms must be just as you see them. Now I feel convinced that a little clever manipulation will take everybody in. Perhaps I may have to make you sacrifice your dressing-room, but I'm sure you would rather do that than leave this dear child behind.'
'I suppose you would be miserable if we did so,' said Lewis.

'It is not my feelings, but the principle of the thing,' said Selva solemnly, sitting down, baby and all, on the arm of his chair, leaning against him. 'A day or two is a different thing, but if this is to be our profession, and we are to be always careering about, and going off for a month at a time, why the poor child would be always deserted, and I might as well be a horrid fashionable mother, who never goes near her poor children.'

'You have too warm a little heart for that, Irish-woman that you are!' said Lewis.

'And you'll let me go on a day or two before you, and trust me to look after George Buckley.'

So Selva had conquered, and let it be for others to determine who was in the right. She started in absolute confidence of her own powers of contrivance, and with her went Aunt Anne, wishing to guard against Irish notions of accommodation, also her son and his nurse, a young and lively person, ready to be generally useful, and Dolph, to whose powers she greatly trusted.

The first view of the Quaking House, as it was the family fashion to call 'The Maples,' made her exclaim, 'Oh, there's plenty of room! What menfolk are to doubt of it!' and the aunt agreed. However, the door was opened by a tall and ancient female, who, 'if not a Quaker, looked first cousin to one,' and whose first address to Dolph was, 'I think there must be a mistake, young man. There was to be no children.'

'No mistake!' cried Selva eagerly. 'I am Lady Willingham, and this is the only one—a very little one, you see, quite in arms, and can do no mischief.'
‘Missus always said no children, and the gentleman never said as there would be any,’ muttered the woman; but she permitted their entrance, as well as that of the cot and perambulator, hoisted down from the top of the fly.

But Selva’s troubles were not ended; the sitting-rooms were tolerable though prim, and one had a little conservatory opening into a charming walled garden. Then there was a kind of study, or business room, and upstairs good bedrooms; but one of the doors, to Selva’s discomfiture, was locked, and the solemn female, Mrs. Rebecca Moggs, informed her that it always was so—it was Mr. Phineas’s room, and Missus wouldn’t have no strangers messing his things.

Even the putting Miss Anne and her two nieces together in one room and dressing-room, which Lewis the father had to give up, left no more space at liberty than one attic, where Lewis the son must be bestowed; and when Selva turned her attention to the study, and proposed to hire a bed, etc., Mrs. Moggs interposed. Her master would not have that room made into a bedroom, and all his things meddled with and splashed. He had never made no such agreement, and she could not suffer it. It was not what the gentleman had given him to expect, but, in an undertone, ‘that came of letting in player folk.’

Selva had a great mind to throw up the whole arrangement; indeed, Miss Dorset would have done so, but she remembered that there was no help for it, and that no other rooms were to be found; she tried civility and blandishment, and at last obtained intelligence of a room in the next house, which on inspection proved to be quite fit to lodge George Buckley, who could have his meals at the Quaking Cottage.
CHAPTER XXI

THE QUAKING COTTAGE

JULIET was sitting in the garden at the Quaking Cottage a day or two after it had been filled and over-filled by its new tenants. The weather was unusually warm for the time of year, and their quarters were so small, that she had taken refuge under the creeper-covered verandah to think out every gesture of Rosalind, in which part she was to make her first appearance, 'Romeo and Juliet' being reserved for the race week, though the rehearsals of it were to be at once put in hand. She had not, however, much chance of study, for Mr. Farquharson's daughter, Lily, came to call, and Juliet knew that it behoved her to be civil, more civil than either Lady Willingham or Agnes would find it easy to be. Lily was a pretty little fluffy-haired girl, with a tremendous cockney accent, and no particular talent for the stage. She had, however, been trained in stage business, and Juliet saw that something was to be learned from her. She was prepared for friendship, and had already told Juliet that she was very glad they had come. 'Pa,' was so particular, and only liked her to be friends with ladies. 'And I shall never be jealous of you, dear, though you do play leading parts. I'll never try and put you out. Not like that nasty thing, Violet
Vere, who trod on my dress on purpose to make me stumble, and would wear a frock that killed mine in "The Two Roses." Oh no, I'm not mean; I despise it.'

'I promise you I won't tread on your frock,' said Juliet. 'We want every part to be as good as possible.'

'Ah, that's like my Pa! He's such an artist! But you know, Violet was jealous because I'd the best part; and besides, she's just mad if the gentlemen look at any one else. Not that I care. Pa's most particular, and so am I. I say, it rests with a girl to make herself respected, doesn't it? Don't you give any encouragement to Clinton, he's a bad lot. I could tell you tales of him!'

'Oh, he plays Duke Frederick, doesn't he?' said Juliet.

'Yes, and quite good enough, too. But as Pa says, he's of an envious nature, and he'll make trouble with the other gentlemen. What a handsome man Mr. Buckley is, dear! Is he a great friend of yours?'

'He is the son of my cousin's acting partner. We have always known him.'

'Ah—he's beautiful eyes. Of course, I see how it is. Don't be afraid, dear, I won't spoil sport. Besides, I'm as safe as safe, for my heart's elsewhere.'

Juliet gave a great start, and to her own annoyance, coloured violently.

'He—he isn't,' she began, just checking herself in saying that he was altogether in another station in life; for suddenly her own eyes were opened, and she knew that only her unconscious sense of superiority had blinded her to the meaning of several recent incidents, and of George's passion for the stage. She
was angry with herself, and disgusted with Miss Farquharson, and said lamely—

'Not at all!' while Lily patted her hand and said, 'Never mind, dear, I'm not a tell-tale. But he'd have been a beautiful Orlando—so princely. But of course Clarence Burnet is higher in the profession.'

'Mr. Burnet can act,' said Juliet. 'Mr. Buckley can't.'

'Oh?' said Lily, with a surprised and inquiring look. 'Law, my dear, you should be more careful. Never say anything you don't want repeated, or you'll make enemies all round. Who's that? Oh my, it's Mr. Buckley himself.'

George Buckley was in a very bad humour. He disliked the idea of being under surveillance, and he considered that he had not been properly treated in the arrangement of parts. He quite agreed with Miss Farquharson that he was exactly suited for Orlando, and greatly objected to put up with Oliver. He was offended by the big letters in which, under Mr. Farquharson's directions, Clarence Burnet's name figured all over Clarebridge, and was prepared to make things as unpleasant for the professional star as he could.

'I thought we were to rehearse this afternoon,' he said, as he joined the two girls.

'This evening,' answered Juliet. 'Mr. Burnet will be here then.'

'A great many have taken tickets to see Clarence Burnet,' said Lily. 'Pa's so pleased to think he can assist a rising actor, and Mr. Burnet said he wouldn't play Pa's great part, Jacques, in his presence on any account. He quite looks forward to playing with him —Pa's so noble-minded.'
'Burnet's not at all the fellow for Orlando, in my opinion,' said George. 'Pettifer had a great deal more dash and style about him.'

'Mr. Pettifer was odiously vulgar,' said Juliet softly and distinctly.

She had much better have taken Lily's advice and held her tongue, but she was not used to pick her words, and was desirous of snubbing the presumptuous George.

'It was much pleasanter when it was all among ourselves,' said George, 'except of course that ladies are always an addition.'

'Oh, I'm sure, Mr. Buckley, I'm not much of an addition,' said Lily, with much play of her pretty eyes; 'but there, I wish some one was going to play Silvius to my Phoebe, though it's not a good enough part, I know.'

At this moment a commotion at the door in the wall, which opened into the little garden, fortunately interrupted the discussion. The excellent Rebecca was parleying with a visitor, in whose face she shut the door, then came up the path.

'It's the person whose name is on the play-bills, Miss. Is he to be let in?'

'Mr. Burnet? Of course,' said Juliet, 'open the door at once, Rebecca; how can you be so foolish!'

'It's not what I'm accustomed to,' said Rebecca grimly.

Juliet sprang up, ran down the path, and opened the door herself.

'Oh, come in, Mr. Burnet; I'm so glad you've come. Now we can get everything settled!'

George frowned, and Lily's face assumed a look of intense meaning, as Juliet introduced her to Clarence, and then exclaimed—
'Here we are, but how could you and Lewis think of taking a Quaker's house, Mr. Burnet? Of all the unlikely places for a travelling company!'  
'Why, we couldn't very well help it,' said Clarence.  
'There was nothing else, and it looked clean and tidy.'  
'Tidy! It's a crime in the eyes of Rebecca to lay a book on the table.'  
'Don't listen to her, Mr. Burnet,' said Lady Willingham, coming out at the French window of the little drawing-room. 'It does very well, and though I find that that wall bounds the Rectory garden, and that the clergy here disapprove of us, and that the garden on the other side belongs to a young ladies' school, I hope we shan't seriously annoy either of them. Have you provided for yourself?'  
'Oh yes, I have found a very decent room, thank you. I'm to be turned out of it if it's wanted in the race week; but I thought I'd take the chance of that.'  
'Come in then, and have some food, before we go down to the shop,' said Lewis, also coming out.  
Miss Farquharson now felt obliged to depart, which she did, with a squeeze of Juliet's hand, and a whispered 'I quite understand, dear!'  
Juliet had humour enough to feel thankful that the sympathy had not been given to Agnes; but she was startled, nevertheless.  
A scrambling meal at five o'clock in the afternoon, for far more people than the little dining-room was meant to hold, and who all talked at once, demanding corkscrews and salad oil, in eager outspoken young voices, appeared to Rebecca an orgie such as The Maples had never beheld. 'Master was a teetotaller, and missis could not abear oil, and never had it in the house.'
Clarence volunteered to go in search of both articles, and presently reappeared with them, when every one laughed louder than ever, and the pops of the corks sounded at intervals.

The familiar intimacy and intercourse with Juliet which George would have valued, if he alone had been admitted to it, was spoiled by the presence of a favoured stranger, and he sat, silent and sulky, until Lewis asked him what he thought of doing to make the old scenery available.

'The property man, Terry, is an insolent scoundrel, who won’t take a hint,' said George. 'But they have a fellow there, a rough sort of chap, that, as I understand, Terry has given a job to, who has a very good notion of carpentering. Something might be made of him, and I believe we can tinker up a great deal of it. I have a design——'

'You’ll see, Burnet, what you think necessary,' said Lewis, as George paused for a moment. 'Shall we come, if you have all finished?'

Old Mr. Farquharson was, as Lewis said, 'a magniloquent old bore,' but he was an enthusiast in his calling, and enough out of luck and past his prime to be very glad of engagements for himself and his daughter. He not only honestly admired Clarence, but regarded him as embodying the chances of a London engagement. In fact, all the Clarebridge set were only too desirous of pleasing him; but in spite of this element of union, the team was not an easy one to drive. Neither Miss Anne nor Agnes were really capable of playing in a theatre, nor were Armytage and Buckley much more so. And it was only by unheard-of exertions that the plays were got into any kind of shape. Lewis himself improved
rapidly, and Juliet, with all her faults and all her inexperience, showed more and more that she had the root of the matter within her.

Old Farquharson delighted in her, scolded her and taught her, overwhelmed her with technique which she could not understand, but now and then nodded his head, and said, 'That'll do,' at some half-accidental tone or gesture. Poor Juliet never quite knew what would do, and generally forgot to do it next time; while her anxiety for Clarence's approval grew so intense that her heart beat with fright as she rehearsed her scenes with him, and more than once, she was almost unable to speak from nervous anxiety.

As for Clarence, he was living at high-pressure indeed. When he came to Clarebridge he had told himself that he would be wise to keep his intercourse with the Willinghams on a professional footing. Nothing could be further from the actual fact. They all liked him, he was their refuge in every difficulty, their oracle in their new world. He lectured Dolph for playing tricks on Rebecca, and lent a hand in the difficulties of the sort of picnic in which they lived, while at the theatre he worked like a slave. 'As You Like It' was to alternate, during the first week, with a light farcical piece, and with 'A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,' in which he was to play Colonel Kirke, as it was soon found that his name on the bills made a great difference in the demand for tickets. Agnes begged him 'to teach her not to spoil it,' and he took such pains to teach her to coquette with him, while she obeyed his directions so simply and earnestly, that Ernley Armytage was as jealous as Miss Violet Vere could possibly have been in similar circumstances.
Clarence admired Agnes; he was too artistic not to perceive her beauty, and was touched by her unselfish painstaking. He told her that she could play Anne Carew, if she would try to realise the feelings of the faithful wife, who endured suspicion for her husband's sake. Agnes's romance was roused, she became much more interested, and consequently much more effective, and the piece promised to be a fair success, especially as a little sister of Lily Farquharson made a most clever child. But it was another offence to George Buckley that the part of Kirke was not given to him; he sulked, and failed to keep the Willingham's' hours, attaching himself to the Clarebridge actors, and being as rude to Clarence as he dared to be. Mr. Armytage was never rude, but he was decidedly distant, and improved as little as he possibly could, carefully avoiding asking advice on his play.

Clarence neither saw nor heard. If all this outside work was interesting, how engrossing was the rehearsing with, and teaching Juliet. He was one moment proud of her power, the next miserable to think how every day made her purpose of going on the stage more definite; one hour he rejoiced in her confiding admiration, the next was stung because she forgot him in his acting. At one rehearsal, Shakespeare's fine and delicate wooing was a rapture to speak, the next a misery, because he dared not mean it. It was all very unprofessional and very unwise; but 'then, how it was sweet!'

So he worked at the stretch of his powers all day, and lay awake thinking of the past day and the day that was to come all night, burning the candle at both ends, in utter recklessness of how long it was to last. And at every interval the conception of his London
part pressed itself upon him, since an individual conception it was; and not only did he, as the great French actor says, 'get into the skin' of Raymond Rivers, but there were times when the personality of Raymond Rivers seemed to get into his, and possess him, instead of allowing him to possess it, a sure sign of undue strain and excitement.

When he found out that he frightened Juliet, his self-control was worn very thin. She, too, was living hard. She had to keep George Buckley at a distance, without letting her relations guess at the necessity, knowing that both Selva and Miss Anne would hardly have scrupled to break up the whole party, rather than allow what would have seemed to them so unsuitable. She was finding out a great deal about her chosen career from Lily Farquharson's chatter and her own observation, which also she kept to herself. She did not waver, but there were moments when the thought of Aunt Minnie, and of the sheltered life which she was casting aside, came over her with overwhelming force. She had undertaken a far more arduous task than she had guessed, in studying two great parts at once; the rehearsals for Juliet were interspersed with those for Rosalind, and, on the very afternoon before the first performance of 'As You Like It,' she had seized a spare half-hour to get a lesson on Juliet's great soliloquy.

They were alone on the empty stage, the others having, more wisely, gone home to rest and eat. He stood silent with the book in his hand, watching her. She was tired and overwrought, his approval was more to her than, with all her anxiety for it, she in any way guessed. She began, and as she gradually worked herself up to the climax, her voice sounded thin and
cold in her own ears, her limbs would not obey her will, his eyes looked at her critically.

"Oh, if I wake, shall I not be distraught?"—her voice failed, her nerves gave way. 'I—I cannot do it,' she stammered, and burst into tears.

Clarence threw down the book and sprang to her side.

'Oh, what an idiot I am to let you try it now, when you are tired, and have the other part on your mind! There, don't think of it; it will be all right. You must come home and rest. I'm a fool!'

Juliet dried her eyes and stamped her foot.

'Oh no, I am! But I—I—if I could satisfy you! But—I told you once that I wanted your opinion. So I do; but, mind, I shall have to go on now. Whatever you tell me, I shall have to do it now, if you do think I am a failure. I'll do it, if I do fail!' She was sobbing as she spoke, but she fixed her eyes on him with that look of utterly impersonal appeal that always seemed to him to come from another sphere, and wrung his heart, even while it thrilled it through.

Do you fancy I think you a failure? I think you have something that all the teaching on earth cannot give you. You have original power, and your face—Oh, for heaven's sake, don't cry! If you cry, I shall—' she did not cry; but she looked up at him with rapture in her face, a delight in his words of praise that chilled him to the heart, and checked his self-betrayal. He grew pale as her colour came back, and, moving away, brought her a glass of water, speaking in gentle, encouraging tones.

'I have let you get much too tired; you must promise me not to think any more about Juliet now,
nor about the future. Let me take you home. You must take care of yourself.'

'You won't tell any of them about it, will you?' entreated Juliet, as he fetched her hat and jacket, and watched her anxiously.

'No, not if you don't get over-tired again,' said Clarence, with admirable prudence.

'I am not a bit tired now,' said Juliet cheerfully; 'and I do assure you I am not given to be silly.'

He smiled and said nothing, but walked back with her to The Maples, talking lightly about the probabilities of the evening. He would not come in, and as they parted, certainly looked the most tired of the two.

'As You Like It' was distinctly a success. Faulty as it might be as a whole, it contained elements of unusual interest. Whatever Rosalind was not, she was charming, and Orlando, in a picturesque dress lent to him by Alaric, and with the sterner characteristics of his face carefully softened by his make up, quite justified his choice of the part. Old Mr. Farquharson was a good Jacques in his way, and Touchstone had never played so well in his life.

Clarebridge took with enthusiasm to the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' and there began to be a brisk demand for tickets.

Agnes was more at her ease. The Sunday was peaceful, at any rate for the ladies, and there was something in the tones of the clergyman that put her in mind of Coalham, and though the ritual was very different, one of her favourite hymns was sung. She had managed to extract from Mr. Burnet what David Merrifield's feat of strength had been; her heart was warmed by it, and hot tears of thankfulness came into her eyes as she followed the 'thanksgiving' prayer said aloud by the congregation with all her heart.
CHAPTER XXII

THE APPROVAL OF THE ARISTOCRACY

Two or three mornings after the opening of the theatre there was a domestic convulsion at The Maples. Rebecca had informed Lady Willingham that her duty did not demand of her to stand it any more, and on being asked what it was that she could not stand, had poured out a flood of grievances.

First, that everybody wanted everything to eat at no times at all. Secondly, that the baby's meals were always wanted at every time when she was in the midst of her cooking. Thirdly, that Dolph play-acted in the kitchen, and when sent with a message about the dinner, had called out to her to 'stir, stir, stir,' and get 'twenty cunning cooks,' though she was cook enough for any respectable people, and speaking in a voice as if he was the master! And had taken her off to her very face, and made the nurse laugh! And more than all, she wasn't used to people coming in in liquor and calling for their clothes to be brushed, as that there Mr. Buckley had done last evening, not to speak of whistling to the young ladies over the wall, which was not, to her mind, respectable. So she meant to go to her married sister's, and leave them to hire in help. Selva was dismayed. It was a busy day. A matinée of 'As You Like It' was to come off
at three o'clock, and the other pieces were to be played in the evening. Some of the party were rehearsing a new farce, which had not gone to Mr. Burnet's satisfaction; and Miss Anne had, most improperly, as Juliet thought, shirked this duty, and with a relief of spirit and refreshment of soul, which a few months before she would little have anticipated, had gone off to attend a conference of the Girls' Friendly Society at the house of the Clarebridge Branch secretary. Nobody was at home but Agnes, and every one would come in hurrying and want to be fed before the matinée. The inexorable Rebecca put on her bonnet and went; the nurse and the baby were out walking—it was already half-past twelve o'clock.

'Hadn't I better go after Aunt Nance, and see if the G.F.S. people can send us a respectable girl?' said Agnes.

'That won't get luncheon before we have to go off this afternoon, and you'll tire yourself out. No, I'll have to turn cook and parlour-maid, as I've done many a time at home. But Lewis isn't an Irishman, worse luck, and the Englishman's set dinner dies hard. Who is that? I wish that door in the wall didn't always lock itself. But that's part of the respectability of The Maples. Oh, Mr. Burnet,' as she let him in, 'you don't mean to say they are all coming back for their food yet?'

'No, I came to look for Buckley. I asked him to come up and go over that scene with the policeman—with old Farquharson and Clinton, but he hasn't appeared.'

'There,' said Selva, 'what can have become of him? He has driven away Rebecca, and we're all in confusion.'

'Well, it must take its chance then. Can't I lend
a hand, Lady Willingham? Shall I go and tell them to get dinner at the Crown?'

Selva, however, had a feminine horror of being unable to provide dinner when required, and she announced herself capable of frying some underdone cold mutton and boiling potatoes, while Agnes and Clarence laid the table.

'I can,' said Clarence. 'I had to play a footman once, and I studied Alaric's butler on purpose. Doesn't Sir Lewis like coffee before playing? Let me make some; I know how. When Alaric and I lived together, he would always drink my coffee when he was tired and used up.'

Clarence had recovered his spirits; the delightful present was too powerful for any forebodings, and the work went on amid much laughing.

'Where's my cousin?' asked Agnes.

'I believe she and Miss Farquharson saw some aprons somewhere which they thought would suit them in the farce, and went to buy them. The rehearsal is over, but I wanted Buckley to go through his part again. But, Lady Willingham, do you know how we were honoured last night. Farquharson feels that we have not come to Clarebridge for nothing. Lord and Lady Rotherwood were in the stalls, and no one knew them. They have never been to the theatre here before, and I gather that we ought to put the fact in the bills.'

'I hope they were gratified. Yes, I don't know if there are still pocket-boroughs, but Clarebridge is certainly a pocket-town of Rotherwood Castle. But they never come to the races,' said Selva. 'There's that bell again! Perhaps it's some one for tickets, they come here now and then.'
'I'll go and see,' said Clarence, and after a moment he reappeared, ushering a handsome well-dressed lady and a pleasant-looking middle-aged gentleman. He showed them in discreetly through the open drawing-room window, and presently brought Selva a card.

'Lord and Lady Rotherwood,' he said.

'Well!' said Selva, 'it's very polite of Lady Rotherwood to call on me; but I wish she hadn't come now.'

She set herself straight, and went off without any discomposure—for nothing put Selva out of the way—while the other two, as time ran short, continued their exertions.

The next occurrence was the arrival of Juliet and George Buckley together, in a hurry, as a heavy thunder shower was beginning to fall, and talking fast and rather loud as they came up the path, evidently in the midst of a dispute. Both dashed in at the drawing-room window, and were shortly followed by Lewis, Ernley Armytage, and Major O'Connor, all hurrying in out of the pouring rain.

'Lewis will ask them *all* to lunch,' said Agnes, who had taken Selva's place, and was not very skilfully cooking the mutton.

'Shall I cut some more slices?' said Clarence anxiously, and presently in ran Dolph.

'I say, Mrs. Moggs, you'd better look sharp for once in your life. Here's two live members of the aristocracy come to lunch, and—Miss Agnes!'

In the meantime Selva's Irish hospitality could allow no one to depart in the rain, and her Irish happy-go-luckiness saw nothing to be ashamed of in a scramble. She asked Lord and Lady Rotherwood, who had come on foot, to have some lunch, before the
purport of their visit had come to the front. Then she told Lady Rotherwood that they had had a domestic convulsion, and that they had all been cooking the lunch together. At this hint Juliet fled to the rescue, Lewis looked uneasy, and presently Lord Rotherwood revealed that some festivities on an anniversary, important to their family and to the town of Raynham, were coming off in the ensuing week, and, having been much struck with the performance of the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' he wanted to obtain their assistance.

'There are to be two days of it,' said Lady Rotherwood. 'The first we are to join in the entertainments at the county town, Raynham, where there are to be tableaux and recitations, and the next we are to receive at home, and should like to give our friends something worth hearing.'

'You see,' proceeded her husband, 'it is an odd sort of affair altogether. My ancestor and one Rowden, a young Raynham fellow, ran away to sea together in the jolly days of Queen Bess, when there was no end of fun to be had. They had the good luck in the end to take an Azore and an heiress, and plenty of Spanish dollars, which made their fortune, and Raynham's too, and as the world is made up of anniversaries, we are bound to keep this—what is it——'

'Tercentenary,' put in his wife.

'Processions and tableaux, and I know not what,' continued the Marquis. 'Have you the sketch of the programme?' he asked, as his wife produced a paper. 'Ay—Service—h'm—h'm. Trades procession. Famous thing for keeping the roughs out of mischief. Dinner. Tableaux in Town Hall. That's to be a mixture.'
‘We keep a hand in it so as to ensure its being in tolerable taste,’ explained the lady.

‘Though it would be ever so much better fun without,’ said the gentleman.

‘There is to be a course of scenes—all Elizabethan, more or less—with recitations between, and to get help in arranging them would be everything, though we hardly like to ask it.’

‘We will do what we can willingly,’ said Lewis.

‘We hope you will all come to us for those three days,’ said Lady Rotherwood politely to Selva. ‘We shall have some pleasant people staying with us, and on the second day we have a garden party, a supper or substantial tea, whichever it may be called, and then a representation—theatricals, in fact, if our friends will be good enough to help us.’

‘Most happy to oblige your ladyship,’ said George Buckley, with an answering bow.

‘What is the exact date, Lord Rotherwood?’ said Lewis. ‘Some of us have a day or two free before the race week, while Mr. Burnet’s engagements take him to London!’

‘We could play “As You Like It” without him, fully as well as with,’ again interposed George. ‘I should be happy, Willingham, to play Orlando.’

‘We were hardly asking for anything so formidable as “As You Like It,”’ said Lord Rotherwood; ‘some little comedy perhaps. Thursday the 18th is our great day.’

‘That would suit, I think. Is Burnet here, Selva?’ said Lewis, bottling up his wrath with George for a more suitable occasion.

‘Well, yes, Lewis, in truth he is,’ said Selva, with her eyes twinkling. ‘You had better go and find him.’
At this moment, however, Dolph announced the lunch, and the appearance of the table certainly did credit to Clarence's studies under the Monks' Warren butler, and as nearly everything to eat in the house had been produced, the result, though somewhat unconventional, was not amiss.

The Miss Willinghams appeared in a few minutes, the nurse having turned up behind the scenes, and Clarence joined Mr. Armytage and the Major, who proceeded to wait on the party and get their own food in corners as at a ball supper. George Buckley had taken a place at the table, but, after a long enough pause to show what he had intended, saw what the others thought correct, and got up also. Lord Rotherwood set every one at ease by his own easy cheerfulness, while his lady looked imperturbable, and showed no sign of being unaccustomed to picnic lunches.

It speedily appeared that the date of the Rotherwood festivities coincided with Clarence's engagement to his uncle. 'Very fortunate,' said George effusively, but no one responded even by a look. 'Murther in Irish' was proposed and accepted as suitable, and then Lord Rotherwood made a courteous speech about the charming rendering of the most charming of Shakespeare's plays which they had witnessed the night before.

'I could hardly believe it,' he said, 'that a friend of mine, Mr. Alaric Lambourne, was not there in Orlando's dress. Your cousin, I think, Mr. Burnet?'

'Yes, my lord, it is a part in which I can only endeavour to imitate him,' said Clarence. 'He was, I think, the ideal Orlando.'

'A successful imitation then,' said Lord Rotherwood; 'but if I may suggest, you should not lose the chance
of producing the "Comedy of Errors." Perhaps Sir Lewis might consider it?"

'My cousin scarcely ever plays now, my lord,' said Clarence.

'Ah, no—I mustn't say here that he is better occupied. I am sorry, Mr. Burnet, that your more important engagements keep you from Rotherwood, but very glad to have had the pleasure of seeing you last night.'

Clarence bowed, accepting the great nobleman's patronage quite simply as likely to be useful to him in his profession, and after the visitors had taken leave, Selva exclaimed—

'Ah, he doesn't know, Mr. Burnet, that he owes the pleasure of his coffee to you as well. You were indeed a friend in need! Lewis, Rebecca went off all in a moment, in a huff, and I should like to know, Mr. Buckley, what you did yesterday to offend her?'

Selva was never very prudent, and she was angry with George for his bad manners. He flared up at once.

'She is a most insolent woman, Lady Willingham, and refused to brush my clothes. She doesn't happen to know a gentleman when she sees one, and confounds me with——'

'Come, we're late,' interposed Lewis, 'you must get some one else, my dear, she wasn't a success. Make haste, girls, it's high time we were back at the shop.'

'We have quite enough to do here, I think,' said Juliet discontentedly, 'without going over to Rotherwood; and I hate great houses.'

'Come now, Jetty,' said Selva, 'it's a great occasion, and an introduction for the "Wills." There'll be a dance afterwards, no doubt. You and Agnes will enjoy it.'
'Honour of the first waltz, Miss Juliet?' said George gallantly.

Juliet looked at him, like the tragedy queen she had been called, when she indulged in little tempers in the schoolroom.

'You'd better leave him behind, Lewis,' she said, as they started for the theatre. 'He'll make an exhibition of himself at Rotherwood, and disgrace us all.'

'I can't, Juliet,' returned Lewis; 'I'm responsible for him. But I'll row him within an inch of his life for interfering about the plays.'

Juliet shrugged her shoulders. She thought that if Lewis knew for how many other pieces of presumption George required 'rowing' even his patience might have given way. Miss Farquharson was fond of relating various means by which 'she kept the gentlemen at a distance.' But it was difficult when you had to live in the house with the specimen, and pursue your daily business in his company. Juliet felt thankful that he did not play Orlando with her, and then recollected that if she was a 'professional' she must school herself into absolute indifference on such a point. Well, Mr. Burnet, she supposed, never thought about anything but his part—which was most satisfactory. He overtook her at this point in her reflections, and she gave vent to some of her various annoyances, by saying petulantly—

'Well, I should think all this interruption would be the ruin of "Romeo and Juliet."'

'I hope not; but I am very sorry for having to go away,' he answered.

'You? Oh, of course you cannot help it. But we might have stayed here and studied it quietly,
instead of going in for these tiresome tableaux at Rotherwood.'

'If they were well done, they might be very splendid,' said Clarence. 'Plenty of good material for study, at any rate.'

'Yes, I wish I'd seen Lady Rotherwood before I played Lady Capulet. She had a sort of still way of looking round,' said Juliet, her mobile face assuming a reflection of the look. 'And her voice, I wish I could get at it! But she's a great deal harder than Mrs. Pettifer! I shall listen and practise, and you shall hear if I get it right?'

'She struck me as a typical great lady,' said Clarence, by no means gratified when the Major overtook them, and began a long story of some festivities at Castle Bally-o-voolen thirty years ago, when the history of his branch of the O'Connor family was represented in a series of tableaux, into which six murders and three duels had to be introduced, while the family banshee wailed behind the scenes.

'Tis the brightest recollection of my youth,' he said, rather sentimentally.

It struck Clarence at once that their tête-à-tête had been intentionally interrupted, but at least Juliet's eyes met his, and they shared the joke of this somewhat Irish view of joyous festivity.
CHAPTER XXIII

IRISH CHIVALRY

Miss Dorset's appearance at the meeting of the mysterious society which Clarence Burnet began to conclude was ubiquitous, and circulating like the Methodists, was owing to her having had a correspondence with the Clarebridge Branch secretory about a young dressmaker, and this had resulted in her being solicited to come to the conference and communicate her experiences as to 'members in business'—a class not yet taken in hand by this diocese.

There she was introduced to the diocesan president, Lady Florence Devereux, Lord Rotherwood's sister, a pleasant-looking, pale, dark-eyed little person, with the bright activity mixed with well-earned repose of outgrown ill-health, and both ladies were interested and pleased with each other.

On coming home, and being received by the nurse with tidings of the domestic crisis, Aunt Nan, as Agnes had suggested, trotted off at once to consult her Branch secretory friend; though, as she said with a sigh, the utmost she expected was a raw girl of sixteen who would break all the quaking crockery and run them up a monstrous bill.

However, Lady Florence, whom she found drinking
tea with the good B.S., gave better hopes, for she possessed in her village that treasure to the destitute, a widow who had been a good servant, and was capable of turning her hand to anything, and she promised, if possible, to send this valuable article in good time the next day.

‘I would not build upon her,’ said Ernley Armytage rather grimly, when the engagement was triumphantly announced when they came back from the theatre; ‘those are just the sort of people with whom it is out of sight out of mind. I wish we had not got let in for the boiling.’

‘They are very different from the Pettifers,’ suggested Selva.

‘Wusserer!’ he muttered. ‘I hate swells.’

Lady Florence, however, was even better than her word. She not only sent, but brought, the invaluable Mrs. Blaine, and happily she arrived in a lucid interval, when Selva was out marketing with nurse, baby and perambulator to carry home her purchases, most of the population were rehearsing, and only Aunt Nan was at home, at work upon Juliet’s ball-dress, which was perilously long. Dolph was also in the kitchen, cleaning knives, and there he promptly introduced Mrs. Blaine, who went instantly to work, as Huber describes the slave ants, turned in among the helpless aristocrats.

Meanwhile Lady Florence was conducted to the drawing-room, and began explaining first the terms of Mrs. Blaine, and secondly that she had come to ask Miss Dorset about some G.F.S. mysteries, etc., on which the two ladies debated eagerly. Then finally she said, ‘And now, Miss Dorset, I want you to come to me for this affair. You appear, don’t you?’
'Oh yes; *faute de mieux.* I'm a truculent old Irish hag.'

'I have a cosy little house, not ten minutes' walk from the Castle, just across the gardens, meant, in fact, for the gardener originally. My sister-in-law is packing people as close as she can, and I thought if you and your two nieces would be kind enough to come to me, it would be delightful. They would have all the fun at the Castle as if they were staying there, and you and I, as much or as little as we liked.'

Miss Dorset accepted with all her heart, and Lady Florence further explained that she had come on a further embassy. She had a poem by 'Mesa,' and she produced two little pink books, emblazoned with the Devereux arms.

Aunt Anne knew this as the *nom de plume* of an authoress of some note for essays and tales.

'She is to be with us,' added her visitor; 'she is a sort of connection of ours, through the Mohuns of Beechcroft. Well, poor thing, I think it is very hard upon her,' proceeded Lady Florence; 'but once upon a time, she wrote for a child's manuscript magazine, which my little niece was concerned with, some verses about a romantic adventure of an ancestor, and the Mayor of Raynham. It has been routed out and touched up, and nothing will serve the Raynham folk but to have a public recital of it. My little niece and her cousin have gone through it very prettily, for it is a sort of dramatic ballad, like "The Spanish Lady," before the G.F.S. girls and the school children; but, of course, they could not in public—I mean,' catching herself up, 'they have not voice enough—nor anything. So my brother asked me to bring it over, and humbly ask if Sir Lewis or any of you can take it up
and go through it. It would be really cruel to poor Mesa to let it be blundered and mangled among ourselves.'

Miss Dorset undertook to consult her nephew, and Lady Willingham, coming in with a basket of apples on her arm, was profuse in thanks and promises for everybody, also of invitations to luncheon; but the visitor was bent on going home early, whereupon Miss Dorset put on her hat to walk to the station with her.

There Major O'Connor was found in quest of his favourite newspaper, and was introduced; assisting the lady to her seat in the train with all his Irish gallantry, repaid by a courtesy which made him exclaim, as she steamed off, 'A homely little body enough, but the real thing—thoroughbred, and no mistake.'

'Yes,' said Miss Dorset, as they turned to walk back together; 'this will be a very different matter from our last experiences.'

'It had need to be! I say, Miss Anne, don't you think Lewis will soon have had enough of this sort of thing?'

'I am sure,' she said hesitatingly, 'your kindness has been unspeakable; but if this is really to be taken up in earnest, Lewis must not trespass on your kindness, but must get other help.'

'That's neither here nor there,' said the Major. 'As long as Lewis drags you and the girls into it, I shall stick to it, whether I'm a mere super or not. It is not fit for such as you to be running about the country with all sorts of people, and into all sorts of places, with no one who knows how to look after you.'

The 'you' was so individual, that Anne Dorset felt constrained to say, 'Me! oh, I'm the old frump, looking after them!'
'That's as one may think,' said the Major, with a meaning bow, which brought a flush to her face and a throb to her heart, as when, twenty years ago, that curate—oh! it was no use thinking of that—what folly! What was he saying?

'Do you think the boy quite knows all that he is letting the young things in for?' proceeded the Major. 'I've been wanting to talk to you about it—the only rational head amongst the lot—for the thing is going much farther than he thinks for. Let him run amuck as much as he pleases, but he ought to consider his sister.'

'Poor Agnes, it is all against the grain with her.'

'True enough, and I've nothing to say on that score, except that it is hardly fair on Armytage or her either to let her be dangled in front of him, like a red herring before the hounds, if she won't have him; and, to do the girl justice, she's the very moral of the herring—quite as unconscious, I mean.'

As her aunt laughed heartily at the compliment, and said, 'Poor Ernley! if so, he had better bring it to a crisis, and as far as acting goes, he would be no great loss! But Lewis hardly sees it in that light, and it would be an excellent thing for Agnes. We could wish nothing better for her.'

'Well! that's no great matter. They can both take care of themselves, and there's no harm done, however it ends. But there's Juliet, the little absurd pussy-cat! She has got no eyes but for that Orlando fellow—nice, well-behaved chap, I grant you, but——'

There was an infinity of meaning in that same 'but!'

'O, Major, I do assure you,' cried Anne, startled, as she recalled her sister's hint, 'it is only that the
dear girl is regularly stage-struck, and no one teaches her so well.'

'Humph, I wonder which would please you best, to see her take up with the stage and with a grocer's boy (as he honestly told us he was), or both! or, what is not many degrees better, that cad of a young Buckley, whom my fingers itch to horsewhip, is casting his impertinent sheep's-eyes on her, and when she turns her back on him, as serves him right, he runs into scrapes that his father will hold Master Lewis accountable for.'

'I was a little afraid of that,' said Miss Dorset almost under her breath, 'but not of the other. Oh, it is impossible!'

'I hope so,' returned the Major, 'and I will say for the Burnet man that he knows his place and doesn't presume. He doesn't go to Rotherwood with us, does he?'

'No, it is only ourselves.'

'So much the better. One can stand being made dirt of one's self, but not seeing the like done with a man in an anomalous situation who really is a good fellow.'

'I don't believe they will make dirt of us.'

'Not trample and kick like those awful beings at Hildon, but calmly tread us down like the useful ground.'

'Well, we shall see, but I don't expect it. Nor does it signify greatly, compared with all the rest. What must we do?—we can't get out of our present engagements.'

'Of course not; but before Lewis makes another, I advise him to be very careful what he undertakes, and with whom; and if he can send young Buckley home about his business, it would be all the better.'
'Certainly, in most ways, and yet unluckily he is of more use than most of us—clever about scenery, and not bad at acting.'

'Except that he would rather let the whole thing go to smash than take a hint from Burnet. However, it is what he is off the stage that makes me uneasy, though I don’t know that I should care a rap if Lewis had not made himself responsible for the young dog to his old father, who has had troubles enough.'

'You will do what you can to keep him right?' entreated Miss Anne.

'And that’s little enough. A lad like that with an old fellow like me is like a pig on the way to the fair. Give him a pull by the leg and he is sure to be going for the other way. But I’ll do what in me lies, you may trust me for that, for auld langsyne’s sake—ay, and the present, Miss Anne.'

'O Major, what should we do without you! I am glad you won’t desert us, and yet it is such a sacrifice, such a penance to ask of you.'

'Don’t talk of that, my dear Miss Anne. There’s that in the being thus thrown together which is enough to make up for any amount of sacrifice, if it were one, to my old commanding officer’s children.'

Wherewith he wrung her hand at the door, but would not come in, and the conversation had somehow so filled Anne Dorset with emotion that she did not dwell more than need required upon Lady Florence’s messages, and when she mentioned the request about Mesa’s poem, she did not speak of the possibility of meeting her. In fact, Agnes had been told at Coalham of the identity of Mesa the authoress with Bessie Merrifield, but under seal of secrecy, as the Admiral and his wife were old-fashioned enough to withstand
the labelling of their daughter as a literary woman; and as nothing had brought Mesa's works before her, and she had reason enough to shrink from the Merrifield name, she had never communicated the fact to any of her family.

Lewis and Juliet somewhat grudged the trouble of getting up the recitation, but after Clarence had read it to them, they agreed that it might be made effective, and would at any rate be something new.

Lewis had also been touching up 'Murther in Irish!' with some counsel from Mr. Burnet, who, however, viewed it as something beneath real capability, and though he spared the author his candid opinion, Lewis was far from regarding it with his pristine complacency, or as did Selva, who placed it at least on a level with 'The Rivals.'

Their hosts at Devereux Castle had undertaken to provide a mob, but some rearrangement was needful in consequence of Rupert's absence. Ernley Armytage was the obvious person to take his place, and be the confidential agent who married the dispossessed heiress instead of her brother.

'But you will have the whole part to get up in this short time,' exclaimed Agnes, when coming to her at the little bay window, he told her, 'and it is so much harder to learn than blank verse!'

'Never mind that,' said Ernley, hesitating. 'It would—it will—be only too delightful to me if—if it can be in earnest.'

He looked up at her and actually blushed, so as to startle her. She drew herself together in haste, and said—

'Oh, don't let us have any of that nonsense! We
have been all going on so comfortably together, don't let us spoil it!'

And she took advantage of a sound in the distance to suppose she was wanted and hurry away.

Ernley was a shy and modest man, or he might have been a better actor. He felt the rebuff to an effort that he had made, in doubt whether it were well to force an understanding during their present connections, and his hopes waned. At any rate, since he could not abandon the 'Wills' at present, he decided on waiting and watching till he should see his way, and not making any further demonstration till the Clarebridge engagement was over. For the present, he went off to the theatre, where he found Lewis and George Buckley before the rehearsal.

'Here,' said he, 'I'm no hand at this swell part! Buckley, you were to be the heir, now you can get things up like a brick. Let us change, I'll keep my old part, and do you take the agent, with our manager's consent.'

'So you funk it,' said Buckley, secretly very well pleased to get a more prominent part, but making a favour of it. 'Well, it's an awful lot on the top of the rest.'

Lewis, who knew that, as far as acting and spirit went, Buckley was the superior, and had acquired a better carriage with practice, but had felt the lover due to Arnytage, looked up in an inquiring manner, and presently managed to get possession of him and demand, 'What's up?'

'Oh, nothing, only it is a confounded long part, and Buckley is ever so much better up to the dodges. I could see Ag—Miss Willingham thought I had better let it alone.'
Lewis, shrugging his shoulders, said, 'Every man to his taste,' and Ernley was content to pass as a specimen of laziness.

At the theatre, the old scenery presented considerable difficulty. From motives of economy, it was to be as much renovated and adapted as possible; and, as the first performance of 'Romeo and Juliet' was to take place on the Saturday evening after the return from Rotherwood, by way of being in full order for the race week, everything had to be arranged before they started. George had had so deadly a quarrel with Terry, the old stage-carpenter and property man, that he had resigned in a huff; and, what with the amateurishness of the manager and the poverty of the theatre, no one knew who was responsible for what. George had busied himself much over the adaptation, especially with painting an effective back scene for the tomb of the Capulets, on which the corpse of Tybalt and other gruesome incidents were artistically introduced. It was cleverly painted, and absorbed the artist's attention; but, in Clarence's opinion, the only person of any practical use, or who understood the principles of construction, was Rigg, the man whom George had originally preferred to Terry, but who by no means always agreed with him as to details, and they came to a difference of opinion over the Capulets' tomb, which was to be ready for a rehearsal before the start for Rotherwood. George, when he was not scene-painting, found the companionship of the Clarebridge actors only too congenial. Armytage never allowed him to be intimate; the Major gave him good advice. Clarence found fault with his play, and, worst of all, Juliet snubbed him continuously. He was sullen and miserable, and ready for any kind of angry self-
assertion, and for any sort of diversion from his sense of discomfort; and, by the time the rehearsal took place, he was in no humour to accept criticism of any kind.

‘Look here,’ said Clarence, after the rehearsal, contemplating the machinery of the village church in churchwarden's Gothic, which was to do duty for the front of an Italian monument—‘this won’t do. The door isn’t practicable. I shall bring all this down with a smash when I break it in. The front must get out of the way quicker too, and leave the tomb open. I can’t wait for it, you know.’

The practicable door, and indeed the whole scene, was an adaptation of George Buckley’s own. He stood by looking hot, stupid, and sullen.

‘It works well enough with a little care,’ he said; ‘and the corpse of Tybalt is indicated on this canvas very effectively behind.’

‘Yes; but we don’t want the corpse of Tybalt down on our heads! Do you see, Rigg—these staples—What—Rigg gone? Buckley, then, look here—tell him before you go.’ He added some practical directions as to what he wanted in a sufficiently peremptory tone, for his train for London was imminent, and he was in a great hurry. ‘I shall not be back till just before the performance, so I must leave it to you. Mind that front scene works quick and safe. It’s a precious sight more important than Tybalt’s bones!’

He rushed off as he spoke, his nerves all on edge with anxiety about ‘Raymond Rivers,’ since, besides the ambition of the artist, failure would and must set him further from Juliet, and success might be something to lay at her feet.

All the Willinghams had gone home already, to
prepare for their visit, and Rigg came back just too late.

'What did Mr. Burnet want, sir?' he said.

'The scenery is my business;' said George, with what he meant for dignity. 'If you attend properly to the working of it, it will be all right. Don't interfere with what doesn't concern you.'

'Nay, ye can mind your own business,' said Rigg; 'but ye'll have a grand smash if those cords are rotten. It'll be "ay, ay, the cords," indeed!'

'Oh, you can quote the play, can you?' said George. 'You'd better mind your own business.'

'Ay, I can do. I didn't hear it first in this theatre, nor 'tisn't the first time I've heard of Mr. Burnet's "Romeo,"' said Rigg, strolling away.

He was a tall, heavy-eyed fellow, with a look of ill-health and a strong accent, unfamiliar to George, who felt that he was not deferential, and went off to Rotherwood without giving him any directions as to altering the scenery in his absence.
CHAPTER XXIV

THE ORANGERY

Various carriages were waiting at the Raynham station, and the footmen thereto appertaining made short work of the extensive luggage. It was in the forenoon, for the latter part of the day was to be devoted to the stage arrangements for 'Murther in Irish' in the Orangery, an old-fashioned appendage still adhering to the Castle gardens, and very useful for public occasions.

'For Lady Florence's, ma'am?' demanded a footman, and the three ladies were packed into a brougham, where Juliet on the back seat betook herself to learning the speeches of the English captive of the Azores, interspersed with murmurs at anything so futile being imposed upon her, while Aunt Nan and Agnes exclaimed by turns on the charms of the autumn tints, and the opening park glades.

The admiration teased and interrupted Juliet. She was as nearly cross as it was in her nature to be, for it seemed such a pity to interrupt the regular work and training for such trumpery as tableaux and recitations, not to say 'Murther in Irish,' which she was beginning to despise; and, without Mr. Burnet, there was neither zest nor instruction; all was void, stale, and unprofitable, except in the mercenary point of view, which of course Lewis was bound to consider.
However, here they were turning off from the main approach to a branch road, and by and by a very pretty garden, enclosed by radiant trees, in American glory of red, purple, and gold, and in front of a charming cottage, deeply-eaved, sharply-gabled, and clothed with shining ivy and glowing Virginian creeper.

At its rustic gate stood two ladies, one of whom, as Agnes emerged from the carriage, held out her arms, received the astonished damsel into them, and kissed her on both cheeks.

‘O Miss Merrifield, I did not guess!’ gasped out Agnes; and in spite of all that gave a sense of shame and embarrassment, there was something in that kiss which gave her a sense of healing and of comfort such as she had not known for months past; and the other ladies stood quite amazed at the effusiveness of the greeting. Indeed, Juliet’s thought was, ‘Oh! if she has her Merrifields, she will be good for nothing except to study from.’

However, Agnes, during the introductions, became her quiet, grave, reserved self again, having had time to bethink her poor, self-conscious self—What could be Miss Merrifield’s opinion of her?

It appeared that Bessie was likewise quartered on Lady Florence, whose little dwelling was rather fuller than it could hold for these three days. The aunt and nieces had two rooms between them. Bessie had a bed in what was really the class and parish room of the little establishment; and when Aunt Nan came down to luncheon she found her and their hostess laughing over the lending library literature she had found on the shelves, and straightway became perfectly in her native element.

But after the first warmth a shyness came over both
Bessie and Agnes alike. The former did not know whether to mention Harry, and the letter on the way to him; the latter, though really wishing to know his condition, was withheld from asking by a sense of confusion, as well as by Juliet's presence, which forbade any reference to that conversation in the train last spring.

Lady Florence at luncheon said that her orders were to take the party up to the Castle, but before they were ready to set off there was a call at the window of 'Flo, Flo, are you ladies ready?' and a tall, fine-looking white-moustached man looked in. 'Coming, coming!' she called back, and then explained to Miss Dorset, 'My cousin, General Mohun,' while he added, 'I have found an old friend, Major O'Connor of the -th. We were together a good while at Delhi.'

And a glimpse of the Major's beaming face, as he stood by the fence finishing his cigar, satisfied Miss Anne that he was undergoing no penance.

The same might be said of Ernley Armytage, who pounced upon Agnes as soon as she came out to renew her acquaintance with another Mohun, a William, nephew to the General, being the youngest son of the Squire of Beechcroft, a contemporary at Ernley's first school, and a great friend of his elder brother, with whom he had stayed at Armytage Court.

The two pairs of friends, finding themselves superfluous, had undertaken to bring the ladies to the Orangery, where it seemed that nothing could go on without them, said the General.

'Without Juliet,' said Miss Dorset; 'she is our star.'

'They want you too, Agnes,' said Mr. Armytage. 'Something about your dress, and the colour of the hangings.'
So saying, he took possession of her, and carried her off, rather to the dismay of Bessie Merrifield, when she heard of his doings with the bluejackets, and that, like the Major, he had joined the enterprise quite in a spirit of chivalry.

The way lay through extensive walled gardens with broad gravel walks, between borders full of late autumn flowers, guarded by espaliers rich with fruit, all glowing in the sun.

'Here are the Mayor and Mayoress coming over for the final arrangements,' said General Mohun, walking beside his cousin. 'It is only to be hoped they have a few definite ideas, for I find Rotherwood has been letting it drift in his regular happy-go-lucky style.'

'Yes, I know. Victoria told me that she should be distracted if she let herself think about it; but she has come to the conclusion that men can't do anything till the last moment, and that matters right themselves, as there's more chance of their doing so, if there's no interference.'

'So she contents herself with being point-device in her own department?'

'Exactly! and going through secret agonies; but at any rate the Orangery will be all right, even if the tableaux at Raynham collapse. I really believe the only fixed idea is that they are to be all Elizabethan, and this kind Miss Willingham undertakes the recitation. Perhaps the Mayor and Mrs. Rowden see their way, as it is more their concern than ours.'

The Orangery was one of the institutions of our forefathers, who used to house their great tub-planted orange trees for the winter beneath its spacious roof; and indeed there was a family tradition that the venerable parent orange tree had been imported by the
original Devereux and his Phyllis from the Azores; and a spray from thence was considered an essential for all brides connected with Rotherwood.

Within was a buzz of voices. Lord Rotherwood, his son, Sir Lewis, George Buckley, and two or three carpenters, were in active consultation over a newly-erected platform, Dolph inspecting the stage properties, but evidently in agony lest the delighted bevy of young people who flitted round, wanting to try everything on, should injure or mislay his treasures.

'So please you, ma'am,' in an imploring tone, as he took the rifle that was to shoot him from one pair of hands, and, 'O gracious damsel, lay that casket down or there will be confusion worse confounded.'

'He speaks blank verse,' exclaimed a tall bright brunette, who, in spite of a brilliant complexion, reminded Agnes strangely of her 'clergy-boy.'

'He does it unconsciously, he is quite a character,' returned Mr. Armytage. 'Heigh, you elf, have you got my sword?'

'Your sword is in its scabbard, gallant sir!' was Dolph's response, but with a twinkle in his eye, for he perceived that he was being shown off.

'Oh! let us see——'

A voice came down from the stage, 'You monkeys there, let the things alone! Fly, I say, use your wings! Run and ask the cook, scullery-maid, or whoever it is for a big black pot or cauldron—the blacker the better—and its chain!'

'Oh delicious!' cried the smallest of the three damsels, Fly or Lady Phyllis, and 'Delicious!' echoed the other two, while 'Let me help,' put in Ernley Armytage, and off streamed the redundant population, much to Dolph's relief.
Then came a sort of dumb rehearsal with a view to the disposition of the scenery, while Bessie drew her own conclusions from Juliet's usefulness and Agnes's submission. She saw, too, a very black look on Mr. Buckley's face when there was a call for Mr. Armytage for the grand arrival of the heir.

'Always out of the way!' he said to Juliet.

'Not unprecedented,' observed she, for George had been very unpunctual.

'Ah, there they come!' said Lady Florence, as a ripple of laughter advanced, and a snatch of the witches' song was heard.

'Double, double, toil and trouble,

Fire, burn, and cauldron, bubble.'

And the black kettle was borne in in full procession—snatched from unwilling servants—Ernley with the actual weight, but all the three girls trying to have a share, one with the lid, and two with the chain.

'You have a fine-looking hero for the final coup,' Lady Florence said.

'Good for nothing else,' muttered George—'except playing the fool,' he added between his teeth, for he was nettled at the familiarity and freedom with which Ernley Armytage seemed to be in the midst of his natural element among those merry girls, or with Lord Ivinghoe and William Mohun.

Presently more figures came on the scene, Lady Rotherwood and the Mayor and Mayoress, the one grizzly bearded and baldheaded, the other portly and gorgeous. Civilities and compliments were duly gone through, and then it appeared that the Mayor and Mrs. Rowden were almost as indefinite as to the tableaux as Lord Rotherwood; though, as Elizabethan tableaux, Scènes historiques had been actually an-
nounced, it was needful to decide at once, and to have something for which there were both actors and costumes. A few ideas had been jotted down, but, as Bessie could not help thinking, the dictum of Napoleon was well exemplified, that man never does anything till it is absolutely necessary, and that too late.

It is not equally true of women, for Mrs. Rowden had tried to get the matter attended to, but her husband was too busy, and declared that Lord Rotherwood’s young people would do it all. And indeed Lady Phyllis wished for nothing more, but her brother, Lord Ivinghoe, had pronounced it ‘all rot,’ and would have nothing to do with it.

The appointment of parts and suggestion of scenes went on with a good deal of eager talk. Everything was to be ‘Kenilworth,’ or ‘Westward Ho!’ or history, liberally interpreted; Lord Rotherwood stipulated for the first tobacco pipe, but his wife begged that it might come late lest the people should be demoralised; and Mrs. Rowden, who would infinitely have preferred the execution of Mary of Scotland, secretly hoped it would drop out of the programme. Sharing Miss Lily Farquharson’s admiration of Mr. Buckley’s eyes, she gratified that gentleman by suggesting him as Leicester.

‘Your ladyship does me honour,’ said he bowing, in the belief that the brocade and velvet belonged to something surpassing the Marchioness. ‘If you will be my Amy, Miss Juliet,’ he added.

‘Amy has nothing to do with you!’ was Juliet’s startling statement.

‘Nay, let me plead for the jewel scene,’ said George, in his elevation.

‘Oh, that’s dull!’ said some one. ‘Besides, is not Amy appropriated to Miss Amy Rowden?’
'Yes,' said the Mayoress, 'our little niece. She would give way, I am sure, to a better performer, but she would be so disappointed.'

'And oh,' cried one dark-eyed girl, 'don't you see the porter and Flibbertigibbet?'

There was an acclamation, for Ernley was, at that moment, standing over Dolph, and the slightest turn of their gestures made the position excellent, even without costume.

'I should have thought,' said the Mayor, with a little hesitation, 'that the part of Sir Amyas Leigh would better become Mr. Armytage, if I am not mistaken in identifying him with the gentleman mentioned in the Tel-el-Kebir despatch.'

Ernley made a little inclination of the head, and there was a sort of gasp from the triad of girls, who found themselves in the presence of their first live hero, while he was readily accepting the porter's part, and having that of Amyas thrust on him.

Meanwhile, Lady Rotherwood observed George Buckley's disconcerted, not to say sullen, look, and asked Will Mohun if something could not be found for him.

'He is welcome to mine,' returned Will, and proceeded to make the offer of yielding Wayland Smith to him; but George grimly answered, 'Thank you. The part of Leicester has been considered more appropriate. I shall reserve myself.'

Will turned aside with a gesture peculiarly his own, to be seized upon by his eager cousins to know 'Was it really?' while George sulked—although he was often appealed to, and was treated with perfect politeness. He felt himself a mere outsider. Every one else had been accepted as an old or new friend, but
he was only a guest, and Juliet's snubbings were perpetual! He was not used to find Armytage preferred before him, and it nettled him.

Ernley, on the other hand, made sundry discoveries from his old friend, clearing up his bewilderment as to who was who among the cousins, and likewise finding out the fact of the offer of the living to Harry Merrifield and the general impression prevailing in the family that he would return to the Miss Willingham who had thrown him over for some mysterious reason. Will Mohun did not know which it was, but Ernley had no doubt, and it explained to him why Agnes had seemed so impervious to all his attempts to attract her.

Perhaps it was a relief. It spared his vanity, if he had any, and left him free, since he was aware that the family attributed his assistance in the theatricals to his admiration of Agnes, and he could now feel that there was no treason in opening his eyes to other attractions.

So came on the evening when there was a great dinner party of grandees arrived to stay in the house, and of county magnates to meet them.

Lady Willingham's share at dinner was an officer who had never been so happy as when quartered in Ireland. Miss Dorset sat by General Mohun, from whom she extracted some amusing stories of the Major's doings in India, and what a favourite he had been with the mess. Ernley's neighbour was the dark-eyed girl, whose name he found was Gillian Merrifield, and who viewed the hopes of being his Ayacanora on the morrow like a dream of rapture, though her enthusiasm almost silenced her. Agnes had the Vicar of Rotherwood—from whose unwitting
lips she heard of the offer of Beechcroft to Harry Merrifield which set her heart beating. The Vicaress fell to the share of George Buckley, and thought him empty-headed and underbred, while he was chafing at his consignment to an old rustic, in a black satin that had seen service.

He did not know that she was an honourable, nor that he was the subject of punctilious civility not being quartered out of the house, though even Lord Ivinghoe had to sleep at the Vicarage. He had expected a renewal of the smoking-room delights of the palmy Pettifer days; and if there were no trace of these, it was hard not to walk across the gardens with Lady Florence's party as Mr. Armytage and the Major were doing on their way to the keeper's lodge.

The long shadows of the battlements of the Castle on the silvery dew of the lawn, in contrast with the lighted windows in the dark wall, were a perfect enchantment to the elder ladies 'in maiden meditation fancy free,' a saying truer of those past the early agitations of opening life than of their juniors.
CHAPTER XXV

TABLEAUX

'And gorgeous dames and statesmen bold
In bearded majesty appear.'—GRAY.

'Can you drive, Bessie?' asked Lady Florence, who had quite adopted 'Mesa' as a relation. 'Yes? Well, will you drive my ponies in? I find that I am wanted to go in state in one of the Castle carriages, and the fortunate spectators are to meet us at the Town Hall. Whom will you take, Miss Dorset?'

'Thank you, if I am to choose, I should like to have Agnes Willingham. She is an old friend whom I knew at Coalham.'

'Is not there something in the wind there? I know I ought to know nothing about it, but things do get into the air, especially when there is a substratum of girls.'

'Something there was, but I am not sure what it amounts to. I want to make out, and this is my best chance of a private interview. What do you think of her?'

'Very pretty. A nice quiet depressed girl she seems to me.'

Bessie was getting desperate, for the intervening day had been one of the most vehement preparation. Every one seemed to be rushing about between Rayn-
ham and Rotherwood, trying scenes, rehearsing tableaux, adapting or trying costumes. Lewis and Juliet, though at first disposed to reserve themselves for the strictly specified engagements, and to despise everything else, had been drawn into the whirl, and were chiefly employed in training the few and far between stars of Raynham to stand still and not turn their backs on the spectators. Agnes had been called on for unexpected songs, and had to get them up, whenever she was not looking after the costumes, and besides all the available lady's maids, the young ladies supposed themselves to be working. They ended with the performance of 'Murther in Irish' in the Orangery, to all the neighbouring town and parish, with unqualified success.

And now on the great day itself, Agnes found herself seated beside Bessie in the low carriage with the two tiny gray ponies, with black manes and tails, trotting merrily before them.

'You only have to sing this time,' began Bessie.

'Unless I have to be one of Queen Elizabeth's ladies,' said Agnes. 'I believe that can only be settled after we get there.'

'To the female mind all this tableaux business has been far too much hurried, but things have a wonderful power of shaking themselves into order at last,' said the future maiden queen. 'I only trust that I shall not suddenly find myself required to dance discomposedly to a little fiddle.'

Agnes laughed faintly, then said, in an anxious, hesitating tone, as if she were feeling her way: 'I did not think you would have done it, though I know you do not think those things quite so wrong.'

'Ah! You are thinking of our last talk.'

'I have been thinking of it ever since,' returned
Agnes, 'and longing for another opportunity. I little thought then how serious a matter it was, and how hypocritical you must have thought me.'

'That I could never do,' said Bessie. 'I could quite see that you might not feel it possible or proper to stand out against your family in a matter which is not of absolute right or wrong.'

'You do think so?' asked Agnes earnestly.

'Everything of that indifferent kind is right or wrong as it is taken up. Don't you see, it makes all the difference what you act, with whom, and why, and again what effect it has on you.'

'I see that. I have said it to myself a thousand times, but it is such a comfort to hear it said by some one else, especially by you.'

'And surely the what, who, why, and how cannot be better than in your case.'

'No, I suppose not. Lewis and Selva would never let us act anything unsuitable; indeed, they had a fight about it with some people once—but then the more professional we got, the more difficult it became to stave off such things.'

'I should like very much to know what is your general impression of the whole thing?'

'Personally, I must tell you that I hate it more and more, so that I am not such a fair judge as any of the others might be, and I can't act well either, and never shall, in spite of all Mr. Burnet's coaching; but for the rest, I have come to think both better and worse of it since I have seen it nearer.'

'I suppose that it is so with every profession in the world. How better?'

'Since I have come to know Mr. Burnet, and watched my cousin Juliet, I have seen that it is, or
can be, a great deal more than just the frivolous amusement I thought it before. I see that when they throw themselves into a good and noble part, they are really trying to understand and interpret a great mind, and it raises them up somehow. There is a great deal more in Juliet now than only being stage-struck; and, you will laugh—but you can't think how it has raised the tone of that boy, Dolph.'

'I can understand that,' said Bessie thoughtfully. 'It is the inner, higher spirit of art.'

'But then there are a good many more to whom it is just a trade and way of living, and who would hardly know what putting a soul into their parts meant, except so far as it ensured success,' continued Agnes.

'I see, it is the same as with my own line. One gets gleams of an endeavour to show forth the truly high and noble, and work out something elevating, and then the main body of the work is just to put honest labour into it, succeed, and to do no harm, and sacrifice nothing to desire of popularity.'

'You understand exactly,' said Agnes. 'There's the best side, together with the education in exactness and expression, and all the drilling. But then there's a harmful sort of excitement, and a depending on admiration, and a temptation to say and do risky things, and, oh, gulfs and gulfs that one has heard of, but never looked at! Even this did not show me till things came out in the chatter of an actor's daughter whom we met at Clarebridge. Once, too, even in acting in a private house—oh, so unlike this—we met with so much that was detestable, that Lewis decided on taking this theatre for a month, so as to have it his own way.'

'And are you indispensable?'
'Well, I'm the only one who can sing; and if they had not me, they must have a professional lady, who would have to be paid, and might be horrid.'

'I see! I do most sincerely feel for you in it all, but I think you might, perhaps, take it straightforwardly as a duty—as, for instance, Fanny Kemble seems to have done.'

'Ah! she was a real success, and felt every one depending on her, which must have made it easier. Now I am only a very bad stop-gap; besides, what has been very sore to me, I have had to give up all my little attempts at helping the good works in the parish, just, too, as I was going home full of plans from Coalham.' And her eyes filled with tears.

'Poor child,' said Bessie, 'you have gone through a great deal!'

'There!—I have never been able to have out a good grumble,' said Agnes smiling, though the tears developed into drops; 'and it is a real comfort.'

'It must be very trying where no one enters into your real trouble, and the conscientious difficulty,' said Bessie; 'but, indeed, I think you may put that aside as things stand. To refuse your brother would have been worse than to consent, and, having agreed it would be well not to go on always à contre cœur.'

'Oh, thank you! You don't know how glad I am that you don't think of it as they all do at Coalham!'

'Do they?' ventured Bessie.

'Oh yes, indeed!'

'Did you never explain all these motives to Alice Wharton?'

'No; perhaps I was too proud; and I knew they would blame Lewis. And'—then bursting out suddenly and eagerly with what had been kept back
all this time—'oh, would you tell me how Mr. Harry Merrifield is?'

'I should think he was nearly, if not quite well,' said Bessie. 'You know, I suppose, that the offer of the living at Beechcroft has gone out to him?'

'Yes,' said Agnes shortly, 'I know that much; but please tell me—I can't ask any one else—was all this my fault?'

'A good deal more his own, I should say. If a man goes to sleep under a tree in a thunderstorm, and then rushes home wet through, in an excursion train, he has every reason to have an inflammation on the lungs.'

'Ah! Reports about it have been another of these troubles. I cannot feel that he was rightly treated; I was angry at the tone he took about my brother, and Lewis came down on him without understanding—'

'That he was impetuous, and did not take any of you by the right end,' said Bessie smiling.

'Everybody was impetuous, I think,' said Agnes sighing.

'Well,' said Bessie, speaking with a sense of being very conscientious, 'probably, after all this, he will come back, as my brother David says, much more of a man. I hope you will put all that is past out of your head. Let it be as if it had never been.'

'I thought,' said Agnes, looking straight before her, and making her voice rigid, 'that the living would never have been offered to him unless it had been thought that all that was over.'

'Never mind. That's all nonsense! I don't believe Mr. Mohun knew anything about it,' said Bessie. 'You need not think about that part of the
affair at all. It is not as if you were enamoured of the stage like your cousin! See! there is the Beechcroft carriage—as a well-loaded wagonette swept past them, and nods and smiles were exchanged. Indeed, so many vehicles began to crowd the way, that the steerage of the ponies required all her attention; nor was she sorry, for she had done her duty, almost against her will, towards Harry, and, though Agnes seemed to her less eagerly-disposed towards him than she expected, she had little doubt of the effect of the recollection of the generous impulse so ill-requited.

By the time they reached the great iron gates of the churchyard, there was a throng of people and of carriages. They were received by General Mohun and a substantial gray-haired gentleman, who took them up to where his ladies were standing in a reserved place—to tell the truth, within a great iron railing, fencing in a whole family of tombs, but commanding a capital view over the heads of the people in the street below. Agnes saw and shook hands with the dark-eyed girls she had met the night before; also with a very sweet-looking, graceful lady, gray-haired and brown-eyed, who was as anxious as she was to keep on the edges, without treading on the flat grave-stones. As to talking—the bells were pealing overhead in the square tower with a deafening clash, and drums and all sorts of instruments playing "See the conquering hero comes" in some region below, but coming nearer every minute, and all attempts at speech were perfectly futile; only meditations on the tombs were possible.

Nearer and nearer it came—a rush of little boys and girls with babies first, then the volunteer band,
which stationed itself just below, showing that more noise was possible, then the gray-coated volunteers, when all Agnes's neighbours were employed in recognising somebody—whom she did not succeed in hearing; then the Aldermen in their red gowns, and the Mayor in his gorgeous collar—all proceeding up the steps and standing there to receive the arrivals in the carriages. Lord Rotherwood in his Lord-Lieutenant's uniform, looking up and nodding to his cousins above; Lord Ivinghoe as a volunteer; Lady Rotherwood in dark-green velvet; Lady Phyllis in white and swansdown; Lady Florence in black velvet. There were other carriages; but when these grandees had been duly received, the party in the pen were let out, and escorted by the north door to the seats in the crammed church reserved by a rope; and again they had to behold the procession, this time culminating in the Bishop of the diocese. There was a short joyous service and sermon, after which everybody was dispersed for luncheon in different parties.

'My dear,' said Lady Merrifield, when they were afterwards on their way to see the dinner to the poor, 'who was that very charming girl who came in Florence's pony carriage with you, and was with us at the vicarage?'

'Agnes Willingham,' said Bessie, with a smile, feeling most dutiful.

'那就是女士一样理智的女人。然后我不会奇怪！但是她真的很好，Bessie？我以为她在教堂里很尊敬，一切。'

'Indeed, she is as good and self-sacrificing a creature as ever lived.'

That was all there was time for, and Agnes herself was long in arriving at a clear understanding who the
lady was who was so kind to her all day. Then every one stood on the steps of the Town Hall to admire the trades procession, composed, after the German fashion, of gorgeous waggons with men in dumb show working at their trades—collahers cobbling, carpenters hammering, printers printing, and the like. Then came the dinner and the speechifying, when the ladies who cared to do so looked on from a gallery; but the corps who were to compose the tableaux had time for a hurried rehearsal and arrangement. To her relief, Agnes found that she was not wanted; there were plenty of candidates for silent parts.

In fact, the tableaux went off better than any one could have expected, so nearly impromptu as they had to be. Perhaps the most remarkable scenes were those of ‘Westward Ho!’ for Gillian had worked herself up to behold, not so much Amyas, as the wounded hero of Egypt. He on his side, tall, magnificent, and with a certain sailor air, let her lead him in his blindness, while she gazed up in his face with all her enthusiasm in her looks, and oblivious that he could, and probably did, see under his eyelashes. With her long dark hair down, she took every one by surprise by her freshly-developed beauty and expression, and the thunders of applause exceeded all except those for the actual impersonations of the Queen and the local heroes.

The various persons responsible breathed freely as the curtain at length fell, and on the urgent entreaty of the Mayor and Mayoress, the whole company and their belongings assembled round an irregular standing feast of viands and beverages of all kinds in the hall where the dinner had been, and there was a very joyous clang of tongues, and many peals of laughter, but
again George Buckley felt a curious sense of isolation. The others all seemed at perfect ease with each other, except indeed the poor little Amy of the piece, but Lady Phyllis was talking to her and making her laugh. Being elevated by a glass or two of champagne, he thought it worth while to make his way to her and jocosely compliment her. 'My Countess,' he said, 'you made me feel like a recreant knight. You acted your part to admiration. Were those really natural tears?'

It was just what Amy did not want to be reminded of; she was an unformed little thing, conscious of having gone beyond her powers, and she only murmured an inaudible 'I don't know.'

Lady Phyllis began rapidly to say how successful the scene had been of the Mayor receiving the charter, to which Mr. Buckley replied, 'Well, yes, in its way; but it is always a pity that mixture of ranks, though no doubt in this case it could not be helped.'

Of course he had forgotten who Amy was, and before she had finished her ice and Phyllis could get her out of the way, he had added, 'Rather a joke not to have Amy and Leicester; did the good old wall-flowers object?'

There was so much laughter around that George thought a jest quite selon les règles; but Lady Phyllis answered coldly: 'Two scenes were quite enough! Come, Miss Rowden, we will look for my mother,' and walked away.

George found himself vis-à-vis with Juliet, and exclaimed 'Vere de Vere' in a tone of mortification.

Juliet bit her tongue to keep it from saying, 'No wonder, if such were the yeoman's manners,' and George Buckley continued—
'One does not expect to be treated as a mere professional after all their soft sawder.'

'Speak for yourself,' she returned.

'Ah! that is just what I am longing to do,' he said. 'You know it, Juliet, if you would only let me.'

'Never!' said Juliet, in a tone of repressed indignation. 'You ought to know better than to think of such a thing. Let me pass, Miss Dorset is looking for me.'

The very words Miss Dorset, instead of 'My aunt' showed the gulf between them; but neither Juliet nor Agnes gave a hint to one another of the crisis that this day had seemed to bring to each.

The following intensified the impressions of the tableau day, Agnes was more affectionately treated, Ernley Armytage and the Major were asked to shoot at Beechcroft the first day they could be spared, and George Buckley felt the more furious, Juliet kept successfully out of his way, and Selva won the affection of Lady Phyllis and her cousin Mysie Merrifield.
CHAPTER XXVI

THE TOMB OF THE CAPULETS

'Now then, hold up your heads. Move with dignity, yet with an air of enjoyment. Remember you are the guests of a great nobleman, and rise to the situation!'

'We have had plenty of opportunities of studying the manners of a nobleman's guests, Mr. Farquharson, as you are doubtless aware. There is no stiffness—'

'Shut up, Buckley—your place is right centre—if you go left you upset the whole thing. Hullo, Burnet, you're a welcome sight! Can you make the thing look less like a funeral on a wet day?'

Mr. Farquharson had been putting the whole company, supers and all, through their paces in the great banqueting scene, which had always hitherto been a woeful failure. Very few minutes remained before it was necessary to dress for the performance, and Clarence appeared on the scene in the midst of the foregoing agreeable conversation.

'Leave the front clear for the masquers,' cried Mr. Farquharson. 'Mr. Buckley, you cannot conceive that the County Paris was close by when Romeo and Juliet were exchanging their first salute. Efface yourself, sir, in good time.'
‘There’s no more time to spend on it,’ said Clarence; ‘we must do the best we can. How are you, Buckley? Is that front there all right?’

‘Perfectly right,’ said George; ‘I understand it.’

‘How has it all gone off?’ asked Clarence, approaching Juliet for a word of greeting. ‘I see in the papers that the tableaux were a great success.’

‘Oh! the tableaux were a brilliant muddle,’ said Juliet. ‘It was rather jolly, but I didn’t really do the ballad well. When I said—

“My childhood’s faith I still will keep,
I do not fear to die,”

I said it as if I was angry, and scolded them. That was quite wrong. Of course they applauded—they applauded every one! But is Raymond Rivers a success?’

‘I don’t know. My uncle and the author don’t agree. I think it ought to be a fine thing, but I’ve only blocked it out as yet——’

‘Come, Juliet, it’s quite time to dress. You will keep every one waiting,’ said Miss Dorset, bearing down upon this exchange of confidences—and Clarence, with a start, turned to the business in hand. He had but just come from his other rehearsal, and had had no time to get some food at the station as he had intended. However, that must wait till supper-time.

There was a very full house; many of the race-week visitors had already arrived; and the performances of ‘As You Like It,’ and the festivities at Rotherwood had excited much attention. The shabby little theatre looked quite brilliant. Behind the scenes all was bustle and excitement; in that most unconventional company, every one did a little of
everything, consequently it was never quite certain that anything would be done by any one. As soon as Clarence had dressed himself in the dark velvet suit in which it was his taste to play Romeo, he had to see that the 'street in Verona' was properly set. It was much more like a street in Clarebridge itself, but George Buckley had really touched it up with some skill, and was now pointing out his improvements in a loud blustering tone, which caused Clarence to look at him sharply, and answer him briefly—

'All right; very good! Take it easy!'

He started as they came off the stage, for there, at the green-room door, stood Juliet, in a dress of soft white silk, quaintly cut and trimmed with gold embroidery, and with a golden girdle round her slender waist. Her rippling, shining hair hung down her back, tied back with pearls, her eager eyes were fixed on his face. Her small slight figure, her simple, absorbed expression gave her the appearance of a child. She looked as if the brook had hardly met the river. How could she realise the passionate daughter of a southern race, the ideal Juliet?

'Will it do? Have I enough rouge?' she said, with a little anxious strain in her clear voice.

'It is quite right,' he said, so gravely that she hardly felt reassured; but there was no time for more. The overture began, every one had to get into their places, the curtain drew up, and the rival servants began their dispute. Ernley Armytage, in a most splendid dress of his own providing, was a careful Benvolio, and his costume was another thorn in the side of George Buckley, who had only a hired dress for Paris, something the worse for wear. Old Farquharson was the Prince, and the other parts were
filled not very much worse than is usual. Clarence Burnet was received with great enthusiasm.

'By Jove,' whispered Lewis to Selva, 'he is a stately fellow; he looks like a Titian, or a gipsy king!'

'Yes, Lewis; I'm afraid he does,' said Selva, with emphasis, as she went off to prepare for her place at the banquet, as the dark-eyed Rosaline. The little white Juliet, with her clear voice and her innocent aspect, had the charm of novelty to old playgoers, and when she stood by the side of her tall dark Romeo the contrast was piquante, if too marked for the ideal pair of lovers. The nurse looked picturesque and spirited, Mercutio had made immense strides since the days of Hildon Castle, and all led smoothly up to the great scene between the lovers. There was no spectacle and no advantage of situation, nothing but their own personal beauty and personal skill. Juliet played with an intense earnestness, a serious eagerness, that yet was not quite passion; but the sweetness and refinement of her aspect, the fresh youth of her voice, her simple confidence, came very near the ideal English maiden plighting her troth, if it did not touch the ideal or 'real' Juliet of Shakespeare; while he played with a force and fervour that some of his hearers never forgot.

It was a most incongruous performance. After the beautiful love-scene, the fight in the market-place, the crowds and confusion was all confusion indeed, and hardly carried through by the efforts of Romeo and Mercutio. Juliet's first scene with the nurse was most successful. It was well done by Miss Anne, and Juliet's coaxing was charming; but the despair and agony, when her brief joy was over, were beyond her mark, and she felt herself to be stiff and inadequate.
Her parting with Romeo hardly rose above what some of the ladies truly called 'so pretty'; but afterwards the emotion came more within her scope. She was resolute and defiant; her bewildered surprise at her nurse's treachery was powerfully given, and when she stood alone to fight her own hard battle, there was a forlorn simplicity in the little girlish figure which moved many to tears; while Romeo, as he worked on towards the climax, put more and more emotion into his play. The same feeling of the pathetic loneliness of this childish creature hung round the scene of drinking the potion. Her resolute tones,

'My dismal scene I needs must act alone,'

her timid confidence in the friar's good faith,

'For he hath still been tried a holy man,'

were full of point, and, as the great speech concluded, she rose to something like real tragic power, as with the last wild cry, half agony, half rapture, on Romeo's name, she drank the fatal draught and fell back on her bed unconscious.

With an interesting Romeo and Juliet, an amusing nurse, and a spirited Mercutio, British playgoers are usually content. The audience was enthusiastic, Mr. Farquharson triumphant, Lewis gratified, spite of all defects, and the curtain drew up on the banished Romeo in the fifth act with all the company in good spirits. Perhaps the Clarebridge audience hardly knew how powerfully Clarence rendered the rapid changes of Romeo's feelings, but they followed him intently till the scene drew up on a pleasant, cheerful-looking English church, recently restored, with a rural landscape appearing behind the wall of the church-yard. The door of the Capulets' tomb—by which
only the congregation could possibly have entered—
was defended by realistic bars, which might have repre-
sented either an iron grating or a trellis on which to
train creepers, and which Romeo proceeded to apostro-
phise and attack with a vehemence thrown away on
their tremulous supports. It was Clarence's view to
play this scene fast, and with violent heart-broken
passion, hurrying over his excuses to Balthazar as if
hardly knowing their meaning, and making his appeal
to Paris to leave him an outcry of deepest despair.
He was no believer in 'inspirational acting,' especially
in that of George Buckley, and had marked out his
situation and action with the greatest exactitude.
Buckley came upon him from the wrong side, and tried
to lengthen out the duel, so spoiling the effect of
Romeo's irresistible passion. Clarence flung him
aside, astonished that he did not die at the proper
moment, and, as he gave the final blow to the door of
the tomb, at which the whole scene ought to have
been pulled out of sight, revealing the interior, the
whole fabric swayed, the wood and the iron-work on
one side of the door was falling inwards. He could
have sprung back and avoided it, but, quick as thought,
he threw himself before it, and wrenched it back from
where Juliet lay, giving it an impetus to one side.
Save it he could not, it fell, with half the front scene,
right upon him, and threw him forward with a violent
effort to check himself right at Juliet's feet.

The other half of the scene drew back as it ought
to have done, and the remains of the broken half being
dragged out of sight, the audience hardly knew how
much of the construction Romeo had intended to
destroy, or whether the frightful crash was part of the
effect intended.
Juliet, lying with her face turned towards the roof, could see nothing, and was only conscious of a great noise, and a longer pause than she expected before Romeo threw himself down beside her, not exactly in the attitude which she anticipated. He spoke in gasping, passionate whispers. Surely no one but herself would hear him? There were breaks and pauses, then sudden risings and swellings of the sobbing voice—

"Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace!"

He should have hung over her, gazing into her face, but he only made one desperate effort to raise himself from the ground, and fell with his face against her arm, all the last words unspoken.

She could hardly keep still through the friar's speech, nor recollect the words of her own waking. She hurried on, not knowing what she said; he must, of course, lie still, and as if unconscious, till, as she flung herself upon him, the great black eyes opened wide and looked into hers, then closed again, as for her ears only, the interrupted speech was finished—

"Thus with a kiss I die!"

Juliet was indeed brief in her conclusion, the dagger did its work, and the curtain fell (according to previous arrangement) as she sank on his breast. She sprang to her feet with a scream that she could no longer repress.

"He is killed—he is dead, really! Oh, what has happened?"

Lewis and the Major rushed forward; the audience outside were clapping and calling.

"Come, Miss Juliet," said Mr. Farquharson; and,
before she knew what he was doing, he had led her before the curtain, and she was receiving a real triumph, with unheeding eyes and ears, hardly able to smile and curtsey, as, in answer to the calls for Romeo, Mr. Farquharson explained that a slight accident prevented Mr. Clarence Burnet from personally thanking them for their kind reception; he hoped to do so on the next performance, which would take place on Monday night. She pulled herself away from the friar and ran back again.

All the lights available were illuminating the débris of the tomb of the Capulets. Clarence was lying, partly supported in Lewis's arms, and speaking faintly and confusedly.

'It was too late—was she hurt? Too late to save her—'

'Very dear fellow, you did save her. No one is hurt but yourself. Keep still—here, take this. Can you tell us what is amiss?'

'I'm smashed—somehow,' said Clarence indifferently. 'But you see, Mr. Merrifield showed me how to hold back the spars—oh, where is she?'

'I'm here, Mr. Burnet. Oh, I'm not hurt one bit! But, oh, what has happened to you?'

'Please, sir,' here Dolph interposed breathlessly, 'here's a gentleman in the audience says he's a doctor. Can he do anything?'

A sensible-looking young man, with all his wits about him, now appearing, and Clarence becoming rather more capable of giving an account of himself, it turned out that the heavy staples and woodwork had severely bruised his left shoulder and side, and that, in the effort to throw himself out of the way, he had wrenched his knee violently, and, half-stunned by
the blow, had only just had the sense to endeavour to
go on with his part. He turned faint again at the
first attempt to raise himself, and the doctor looked
grave and said that he must be taken home carefully,
when he could tell better what was the extent of the
injury.

Dolph supplied the fact that Mr. Burnet’s room
was on the ground-floor, and close by the theatre;
and, while means of conveyance were being arranged
under the doctor’s directions, Lewis told his ladies to
go home, and he would send word as soon as possible
how matters were going.

Juliet took off her bridal-dress, and in a maze of
bewilderment, hardly knowing which was the play
and which was real life, followed the others out into
the cool fresh air, back to the Quaking Cottage.

‘And what did happen?’ said Agnes, as they
found themselves at last in the little dining-room,
with supper on the table, and little heart to eat it.

‘What happened!’ said Selva. ‘Why, George
somehow mismanaged the scenery there—it wasn’t
safe. I saw it happen. I was standing in the wings,
and I screamed, though no one heard me, for I saw it
all shake and wobble, and I thought it would come
right down on Juliet, and I called to her to get up;
but he gave it some sort of jerk and turned it aside,
and it fell and threw him right down. There was an
end, I thought, but he staggered up in a minute and
flung himself across to Juliet, and went on somehow.’

‘Then he saved Juliet’s life?’ said Agnes.

‘Well, he saved her from being hurt, certainly,’
said Selva; ‘but there, a strong young fellow doesn’t
mind a few knocks and blows. Sure, he’ll be none
the worse for it.’
She made an imperative sign as she spoke.

'What do you mean, Selva?' said the obtuse Agnes, while Miss Dorset chimed in—'Oh yes, I don't suppose it's anything very bad. Come, Jetty, have some wine, and try and eat some supper. You got on splendidly, and made me cry.'

'Oh, it was a grand performance, and we'll all be laughing at our fright to-morrow,' said Selva, when there was a ring, and they all started up as Ernley came in.

'Well,' he said, 'we have got Burnet to bed; he is badly hurt, but there are no bones broken, and the doctor says he can hardly tell yet how much the muscles are strained. It appears that he has had no food all day, which accounts for his state of exhaustion. His landlady seems a good sort of person, and Willingham is going to stay with him. He's in terrible pain, poor fellow, and hardly yet come to himself.'

'He won't be able to act on Monday,' said Selva.

'Act? No; it's a bad look-out. He'll be laid up for the present. If the tomb had fallen on that fellow Buckley's own head, instead of on Burnet's, it would have served him right, and been less of a public misfortune.'

At this moment there was another arrival—George Buckley, voluble and full of excuses.

'I assure you, Lady Willingham, the front of the tomb was perfectly safe with a little care, and if Rigg had not been such a sulky brute, keeping out of the way because I called him to order—but Burnet's style of acting is so violent, one would think he expected to break down real stonework; and to fight with him is quite dangerous. I've been investigating the causes of the accident, and I'm perfectly certain it's not owing
to the support I removed to fix up the canvas with Tybalt's corpse on it, for I replaced that.'

'Oh, now it's accounted for,' said Ernley bluntly. 'But you'd better go to bed, Buckley; you'll see it differently to-morrow.'

'Yes,' said Selva; 'and if Mr. Burnet is killed, and there's a coroner's inquest upon him, it's you that will have to answer for manslaughter, for I saw the tomb fall on him.'

Juliet had hardly spoken a word. There was no possibility of solitude for her. She could only hurry into bed and hide her face on the pillow, so that her aunt's anxious glances saw nothing but her rippling hair and motionless figure. But her heart beat as if it would burst. In any case, it must have been for her an evening of intense excitement; and now all the passion of the play came over her as if she had never seen or heard it before. Clarence's eyes, in their sudden momentary gaze, had revealed—what? Juliet—herself? She could not think, she could only feel a more intense emotion than she had ever known that all the emotional words which she loved to speak could imply.

'You had better stay in bed, Jetty,' said her aunt the next morning; 'you must be worn out.'

But Juliet sprang up and dressed hurriedly. She must hear the first possible news of him. She came downstairs as Lewis entered, to be assailed at once by eager inquiries.

'Well, no worse, I hope. He is a plucky, unselfish fellow as ever I saw—used to take his luck, and expecting no one to trouble about him. The first consecutive thing he said was to ask how we could manage; and he says I had better go up at once to
town and see Clarke and Musgrave, who might find us some fellow ready for any start. It's the most con-
founded ill-luck, but it's all we can do.'

'But aren't you going to write to Mr. Burnet’s friends?' said Selva.

'He begged me not to tell his uncle till he could say how long he should be laid up. I'm afraid it's a serious matter for him just now. He said there was no occasion to alarm anybody; and when I suggested Lambourne, he looked a little doubtful, but said he thought to-morrow he could write himself. But I shall write; some of his people ought to know. He seems only to want not to give trouble; and said the landlady was a good sort, and had a son who could help him a bit.'

'But you won't,' burst out Juliet.

'Not exactly, Jetty. The Major will look after him while I'm away, or Armytage.'

Here George, who had come in while Lewis was speaking, and to whom nobody had spoken, said—

'I'm sure, Willingham, it was Burnet's own fault.'

'How do you make that out?' said Lewis shortly, as he began his breakfast.

George began a very long and voluble account of all he had done to the scenery, and how judicious he had been about it, which culminated in the statement that his one and only desire had been to make an effective background for Juliet with the corpse of Tybalt.

'You nearly made a foreground for her with the corpse of Burnet,' said Ernley Armytage, who had just come in.

Juliet burst out laughing. Something in George's face or voice struck her as ludicrous, and her suppressed
emotion took this shape. As she found laughter changing into sobs, and her self-command vanishing, she turned and fled upstairs, and locked herself in, while her relations looked at each other and said nothing.
CHAPTER XXVII

THE RULING PASSION

On that same Sunday afternoon, Clarence, after a day of pain and feverish discomfort, roused himself from confused moody fancies that were hardly sleep, and heard some one moving across the room.

'Armytage,' he said, 'is that you? Is there some water?'

No one spoke; but he was gently helped to raise himself, and the water held to his lips—held in long, slender, brown fingers, which were not those of Armytage. He looked up at the face that bent over him.

'Alaric!'

'Yes, dear old boy. I told you I should have to pull you out of the quagmire. There—is that easy for you? Is the pain bad?'

'But how—when—— Is it to-morrow?' said Clarence confusedly.

'No, it's to-day,' said Alaric smiling. 'Emily and I came to London yesterday for a day or two, on our way to Homesworth to see her mother. I looked in on Clarke, and heard that Willingham had come up to look for a Romeo, and all about it. Clarke had sent him on to Musgrave. So Emily and the kids will go on to-morrow to Homesworth, and I came off at once to see what was the matter.'
'You came to play Romeo? Oh, that's good!' 
'No, indeed; I came to look after you. I've interviewed the doctor, and a jolly old Irishman, who told me where to find you; and I'm going to see that you obey orders. My turn now to take care of you.'
'But, Alaric, they are in such a fix, all next week arranged for! Musgrave will send some duffer. There'll be a breakdown, and she will not have a fair chance. I—I don't know quite if I'm talking sense, my head's so queer. But with you, it won't matter about me. I spoiled all the last scene—her first performance. I mulled everything yesterday. Raymond won't be a success either.'
'Hush! I can't have any more talking. I'll go presently and see what is to be done.'
'I shall be easier if you will,' said Clarence, more sensibly. 'Oh, I'm glad to see you! Anyhow, you'll understand——' Then he seemed to check himself, and added, 'You mustn't be anxious. I'm not very bad, it's only the inconvenience.'
Alaric soothed him as well as he could; and presently, seeing that he was still uneasy, took up his hat, and, calling the landlady to be at hand, went off to find Sir Lewis, hoping that a Romeo might have turned up from among Mr. Musgrave's 'Stars'; for he was too anxious about Clarence to be in the humour to fall in with his suggestion.
He got the direction from the landlady; and as he came up to the Quaking Cottage the door opened, and a small slight girl came out. She started as she saw him, and, after a moment's pause, said, 'Mr. Lambourne?' with half-uncertain recognition.
'Yes. Has Sir Lewis Willingham come back? I heard from Mr. Clarke of my cousin's accident, and
came to see him. He is very anxious as to how his place is to be supplied.'

'Oh, do come in!' said Juliet. 'Lewis has come back; he can't find any one suitable.'

She took him into the drawing-room, where the others sat disconsolately over their tea.

'I suppose I shall have to go to the agents and try for a professional to-morrow morning,' Lewis was saying. 'Good heavens! Burnet!'—as he caught the echo of Alaric's voice and a glimpse of his figure in the door.

'No, unluckily—Lambourne. I've come to look after him.'

He made some explanations as to how he had heard of the misfortune, and Lewis related his unavailing search for a Romeo on a Sunday afternoon.

'Well,' said Alaric, 'Clarence has sent me to offer myself in his place. I'm out of practice, and I never was good for much; but I have played Romeo with the "Stars," and, as you have seen, I look something like Clarence, and I know his line, so I shan't put you out, perhaps, as much as a stranger.'

'You! Oh, but that would be capital! You are staying here, then?'

'Yes; I must look after Clarence, of course. The doctor tells me there's nothing to be alarmed at. The knee only wants rest; and though his shoulder is very much hurt and bruised, he thinks there is no permanent injury. But he is more knocked up than I should have expected. The doctor thinks he is overtired or overworked in some way, but I don't see why. He has had more holiday than usual, and he is very strong. He must be well nursed now, and I shall send for my own man-servant, who is a capital nurse, and knows him well too. Clarence would worry himself if he
thought I had no one to help me, especially as he wants me to play his part for him. That seems most on his mind.'

'And the lodgings—are they comfortable enough?' asked Selva.

'Yes, I think so. Fortunately, there's been a disappointment about guests for the race week, so I've just taken all the rooms. I believe they meant to turn Clarence out if they wanted his room; but luckily the party isn't coming.'

'Well,' said Selva, 'as for being knocked up, it seems Mr. Burnet rehearsed all day in London, and had nothing to eat yesterday. And he has worked very hard for us, and done heaps of things which we couldn't have asked of him; and he was a magnificent Romeo. I'm sure no one would have believed he had ever been cheerful and comfortable in his life.'

'And besides,' said Miss Dorset, 'his presence of mind saved my niece from the accident that has happened to himself; but for his coming between, the scene must have fallen on her. We can't express enough gratitude.'

'I didn't understand that,' said Alaric. 'He has been reproaching himself for spoiling the end of her performance. Of course, if he saw the scene falling, what else could he do? Well, if you kindly accept my inefficient help, to-morrow morning I suppose we had better go through with it.'

'We are more grateful to you than we can say,' said Lewis. 'Shall I come and thank Burnet for sending you, or is he better left quiet?'

'I think so, just to-day; he seems nervous and feverish. He will rest, I think, now this matter is settled.'
'But,' said Miss Anne again, with rather formal insistence, 'you will tell him we are quite aware of what we owe to him. Juliet?'

Juliet looked at Alaric, her direct gaze showing him that she was more than a little, pale, insignificant girl.

'Tell him he didn't spoil the end of the piece,' she said abruptly, and as if in spite of herself.

'O Juliet,' said Selva, 'you think of nothing but the pieces!'

Alaric departed, after a little more theatrical consultation, with food for reflection. He went into the post-office and despatched his note to his servant in time to catch the Sunday post, also a few lines to his wife, explaining his intentions, and adding, 'There's something up, and I think it's as well I'm here to see him through.'

Then he went back to Clarence, and told him that he had undertaken to play both Romeo and Orlando through the week; and Clarence heard with relief, but with eyes still wistful and eager.

'And I hear you heroically sacrificed yourself for your Juliet, and, as far as I understand, held up a whole tomb on your shoulders. The whole family expressed the greatest gratitude.'

'Folly!' said Clarence.

'And Miss Juliet—her name is Juliet, isn't it—desired me to tell you that you had not spoiled the end of the piece for her.'

'Did she say that?'

'Those were her very words.'

Clarence flushed up and gave a long sigh. But he obediently took the food on which Alaric insisted, and presently fell asleep quietly, had a fairly good night, and woke up the next morning entirely himself, and,
though in much pain, and looking as if he had been ill for a fortnight, was bent on giving Alaric every possible instruction, and warning him impartially as to Juliet's weak points.

'Now,' said Alaric, 'you can't sit up and look out of window, or you might see "Mr. Alaric Lambourne" being pasted up in blue letters across your pink bills, and extra notices about a slight accident, and my kindly consenting, etc. I had that done, or the public might have thought you had suddenly gone off in your acting. You leave me to work it out. Where's the dress? I'll just put it on and see how I feel in it. Oh, this is Hamlet just going out of mourning. I believe Romeo was naturally a Veronese masher, and dressed himself up to catch the eye of Rosaline.'

'Perhaps you'd like to wear sky-blue satin, as I believe one of the Kembles did. You look quite masher enough for anything. I never made the scarf sit in that style. Yes, alter the belt—you're much slighter than I am.'

Perhaps the sight of the graceful Alaric in his Romeo dress could hardly be perfectly delightful to poor Clarence, either as player or as lover. But Alaric, his mind relieved as to his cousin, felt his spirits rise at the touch of the costume, like a war-horse at the sound of the trumpet, though he laughed at himself when Markham, the solemn old servant, arrived, and, on hearing his plans, observed indulgently—

'Well, sir, and no doubt you'll enjoy it.'

Markham took the command of the whole house, including the landlady, whose ideas were entirely upset by the 'theatrical gentleman' (whom she had taken under protest) producing such an appendage, and proving so profitable a lodger.
Alaric left the old butler in charge and went off to the theatre, nervous enough as the critical moment approached.

The ‘Wills’ felt themselves left to a new self-dependence, and Juliet dreaded the performance unspeakably. Alaric had no command of Clarence’s methods, and played Romeo on lines of his own. He was much more love-sick and dreamy in the early part—really the moon-struck boy who fancied himself heart-broken—and all through he was tender and pathetic rather than passionate and fervent; most graceful, and with an indefinable personal charm that made the performance delightful, even though it was infinitely weaker than that of his cousin. It was very skilful in its recognition of the actor’s own limitations, though unpractised, and with technical faults; and Agnes, Selva, and Miss Anne preferred it to Clarence’s tragic intensity.

On Juliet, the effect was curious and unexpected. Her emotional power seemed to be set free. She was as much stronger and more intense than Alaric as Juliet is than Romeo. Whether in some subtle way Clarence had overpowered her, or whether last night had really touched her with a new fire, she played with twice her former force. Alaric was amazed at her; there was no lack now of passion. Now she parted from her Romeo with a wife’s devotion, and wept for his banishment with adequate despair.

The performance was triumphantly carried through, the last scene (properly repaired, it need hardly be said), came to no mishap, and this time Romeo led Juliet before the curtain to receive applause without stint.

Alaric hurried back to give his report to Clarence, knowing that he would not sleep without it.
'All well—all jolly!' he said eagerly, as he stood beside the bed. 'Glorious old humbug that it is! How I did enjoy it! Tired? Not at all.'

'And—and what did you think of—the Juliet?'

'Why, I don't think you do her half justice! You should have Uncle Dick down to see her. She's a splendid child—a child with a soul. She'd carry any fellow through.'

'Now, sir, begging your pardon, it's half-past twelve. Mr. Burnet should be asleep,' said Markham sternly, and turning his master out of the room.

'I suppose, Jetty,' said Agnes at the same moment, 'that you found Mr. Lambourne much easier to play with than Mr. Burnet? You did act so well to-night.'

'Did I?' said Juliet. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Agnes, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Mr. Lambourne acts very nicely.'
CHAPTER XXVIII

A BENEFICENT IMP

'AUNT NANCY,' said Selva, the next morning, as they sat at work, while some of the party were at the theatre, going through such scenes in 'As You Like It' as were affected by the new Orlando—'Aunt Nancy, I want to know what you think of everything. We've got ten days more here; and then——'

'Then?' echoed Miss Anne, who was making an alteration in Rosalind's doublet. 'Has Lewis any more offers?'

'Nothing very definite. And—well, Aunt Nance, we shan't have Ernley any longer. We won't have George, and I should think the Major was sick of it.'

'Oh, the Major will always stick to us. He has told me so,' said Miss Anne.

'Well,' replied Selva, 'I suppose it isn't likely that anything would happen to upset him. He isn't likely to be falling in love.'

'Most improbable,' assented Miss Dorset.

'But Ernley Armytage has been different ever since we met at Rotherwood. Agnes doesn't mean, I see, to have him. And you know the "clergy-boy" has got a living. His people all made up to Agnes, and that's what it'll come to.'

'He seemed rather a foolish youth,' said Miss Anne.
'But if that's what Agnes is looking to, of course she can't go on acting with us.'

'And Lewis won't be content with the old ways either. Clarence Burnet has made him too critical. I'm not sure that he wouldn't like to go regularly on the stage himself. But he'll not be content with us much longer. And Juliet——'

'I don't see how Jetty is to settle down again at the Wharf House.'

'She never will, Aunt Nance—never. And how either you or Lewis can refuse to let her take to the profession I can't see, after all this. Besides, she is of age, and you couldn't really stop her. And she's in deadly earnest.'

'It seemed just a little temporary amusement or occupation,' said Miss Anne, rather weakly. 'Perhaps we ought to have remembered that George Buckley might lose sight of his position in such intimate intercourse. But I never thought of it.'

'George is in a bad way, and he is just mad about Juliet, poor fellow! But she'll never think of George.'

'O Selva, nor of the other one,' exclaimed Miss Anne. 'So—so—so out of the question.'

'Whether Juliet is in love with Clarence Burnet I can't say,' replied Selva, who belonged to a more plain-spoken generation than her aunt. 'But at least she has found out that he is in love with her.'

'But is he?'

'Yes, that he is! I've seen him look at her. But I don't believe she found it out till the accident. It has only just struck me. And now, you see, unfortunately he has saved her life. I wish he had not.'
‘So do I,’ said Miss Anne, quite unconscious of the ghastly nature of the sentiment she was echoing.

‘For it was her life. It was a horrible weight that fell on him. No wonder he’s so badly hurt, poor fellow.’

‘It’s very unfortunate; but it’s quite impossible,’ said Miss Anne. ‘An actor, and a man of no origin at all! Because, you know, his being Mr. Lambourne’s cousin has nothing to do with it. I allow it’s confusing; but Alaric Lambourne’s mother was nobody—a gipsy dancer. And I’m sure I remember hearing, not so many years ago, that those excellent Martin Lambournes had a great deal of trouble about Alaric taking up with a cousin who led him into mischief. I remember now thinking at Homesworth that Mrs. Martin Lambourne didn’t seem to think much of Clarence Burnet. But at least Jetty can’t see anything of him now.’

‘He’d better be acting with her every night than lying there like a wounded hero,’ said Selva. ‘However, he doesn’t—at least, he didn’t—know that she guesses, and I don’t think he means to tell her—not while he is here, at any rate.’

‘Perhaps he sees the unsuitability of it,’ said Miss Dorset. ‘He certainly is very nice in all his ways.’

Selva thought the attachment a great misfortune; but she laughed a little at this way of putting it.

‘O Aunt Nance,’ she said, ‘they may resolve, but they always let it out! What’s this?’

‘This’ was a basket of peaches for Lady Willingham, which had been brought, the messenger was desired to say, from Monks’ Warren by Mr. Lambourne’s servant when he came to wait on Mr. Burnet.

Dolph, who brought it into the room, added, ‘If
you please, my lady, might I have one for Mr. Rigg. He is so dreadful thirsty that we ought to

"Feed him with apricocks and dewberries;
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries."

'Indeed!' was the exclamation, as Selva looked for the ripest peach. 'What is the matter with him?'

'Well, my lady, I can't tell, but I think if Miss Anne would be so good as to come and see him, it would be mercy that droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. He's been ill, I believe, ever since he came, here, and only just kept about of late. And, says he if he'd had all his wits he'd have known the scene wasn't safe before Mr. Burnet came back—not that he supposed Mr. Buckley would have minded him. His landlady's as hard as a nether millstone, and would like to send him to the workhouse.'

'Has he had no doctor?' asked Selva.

'No, my lady. I wanted him, but he has not the means; and he will not be beholden to nobody, but only wants to die there in peace if the Goneril of a woman would let him,' said Dolph, with a theatrical gesture, but genuine dew on his eyes.

'Poor dear, dear fellow!' cried Selva, jumping up. 'We must go and see him directly, Aunt Nance,' and she caught up the whole basket of peaches.

Just at the door, however, they met Lewis and the Major, and on her incoherent explanation of the errand, Lewis declared that he would not have Selva running into such places; and he wanted her, besides, to come and rehearse 'Audrey.' Do anything for the poor chap that was wanted, but she was not to go to some horrid lodging-house.
'There's no reason that I should not go,' said Miss Anne.

'With me, then,' said the Major. 'I'm just released, and am twenty times at your service.'

So off they set, with a cavalier look of courtesy from the old soldier, and a comical little bridle of the lady, which made the husband and wife glance at each other and laugh.

'Really I shouldn't wonder,' said Selva.

Lewis exploded. 'Old Aunt Nance! That's good! And we will finish "As You Like It" properly, with couples going to the ark!'

'You won't catch any of the others,' said Selva.

'Certainly not Agnes and Ernley.'

'No; I'm afraid not. Poor old chap! I suppose it will have to be that young ass of a cleric, now he seems to have got the provender he held out to her. Every man to his taste. But why could she not like a good fellow like Armytage, who has stuck by us like a brick for pure love of her?'

By and by Miss Anne reappeared at the theatre, when the rehearsal was just going on, saying that the poor man seemed to be very ill, and the Major had gone to inquire about admission to the infirmary, since the place was perfectly unfit for a sick man, or, indeed, a healthy one, and the only person who had attempted to attend to the patient was Dolph.

'What a mixture that boy is,' she said. 'I was uneasy at his not going to church yesterday evening, and it seems he was reading the Bible to this poor man, and trying to persuade him to let him write to his friends.'

'Imp and celestial chorister compounded,' said Lewis.
The Major tumbled in, uttering Irish imprecations against the doctors for being all out; but Alaric, who was just departing, said—

'I'll ask Dr. Webb to go. I hope he'll look in again to see Clarence; he had such a bad night, and I don't like his look to-day at all.'

Miss Anne expressed regrets, and thanks for the peaches.

'Oh! Clarence sent them,' he said. 'I'm afraid I made a mess of it, Miss Juliet. I enjoy it of all things; but—— However, he would scold me for being so anxious.'

He went off in a hurry; and Juliet, vaguely uneasy, wondered what people would say if she made a mess of it because she was anxious about Clarence Burnet; while Miss Anne, in spite of the logic of her argument to Selva, felt that the close affection between the cousins, to say nothing of their unusual likeness to each other, did confuse the situation.

'How did "Orlando" go?' was Clarence's first question when his cousin came in.

'Villainously. But I've fallen so low, I should enjoy "Hamlet" at a week's notice in a back drawing-room. I'm very trying to Rosalind. Not that she has attained to all the delicate graces of high comedy herself. But there's a purpose about the little sprite. How are you—feeling bad still?'

'I don't know how bad I ought to feel,' said Clarence ruefully. 'I feel good for nothing. And there's "Raymond Rivers"——'

'Oh, hang "Raymond Rivers"! I'm sure he deserved it. Here's the paper. I'll read you to sleep with the "Agricultural Outlook."

Whether the subject or Alaric's soft voice might
have soothed Clarence's fretted nerves was never proved, for it was interrupted by a railway cab dashing up to the door in a violent hurry, then a thundering knock, and a voice, at the sound of which Clarence started up from his pillows, exclaiming—

‘There's Uncle Dick!’

‘Oh! confound him! And I wrote so judiciously. Keep quiet! I'll calm his anxiety.’

Mr. Richard Burnet, otherwise Mr. Belville, of the Planet Theatre, was a fine big man of the same type as his two nephews, but though perhaps conventionally handsomer, without the distinction which, in different ways, they both possessed. He was, as Alaric had once put it, exactly what outsiders would expect of a melodramatic actor, conspicuous and dashing, with a hearty noisy manner—in fact, stagey in private life.

‘Well, Alaric, my dear fellow, and what's all this? Didn't I tell Clarence no good would come of all this tomfoolery? If he's laid up now it'll be the ruin of me! There's that infernal piece on my mind day and night——’

‘Hush! uncle—Clarence will hear you, and he mustn't be agitated on any account. He'll be all right with proper rest and care. It's very unlucky, but he has made a tremendous hit here. It hasn't been time thrown away—crowded houses, and quite a sensation!’

‘Why—why, you don't mean to say these “Wills o' the Wisp” are any good? Well, well, well!—I tell you what I'll do. I'll stay and have a chat with Clarence, and go and see them to-night. You're playing, ar'n't you? Ah, my dear boy, Providence spoiled a fine actor in making you a country squire I played in this theatre some five-and-thirty years ago. I was the wounded soldier in “Macbeth”—
“But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.”

Oh’—with an appropriate groan—‘fine part in its way! And then one tumbled into bed and slept like a top. But now—

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.”

I’m in that state of nervous anxiety that I declare——’

‘Yes, Uncle Dick,’ said Alaric, who by no means agreed with King Duncan as to the becomingness of his uncle’s words on this occasion; ‘we shall all feel immensely honoured. Now let me order dinner for you at the hotel. I’ll ask Sir Lewis Willingham to meet you at supper afterwards. If I let you see Clarence for one minute you must promise not to talk about the play.’

‘No, no, I won’t. Poor lad!—I wouldn’t reproach him for the world!’ And when Alaric, thinking it best for both parties to admit him, allowed the interview, Uncle Dick, who was very fond of his nephew, and very soft-hearted, was quite overcome at the sight of his white face, and remarked, in a broken voice and a stage aside to Alaric, that he was afraid the dear boy was quite done for.

‘Not quite, uncle,’ said Clarence, laughing a little. ‘I’ll mend up, I hope, in time for our first rehearsal.’

‘Forbidden topic—forbidden topic,’ said the uncle, with a wink at Alaric. ‘I’m going to see your friends here to-night. Promising débütante, I’m told. What d’ye think of her?’

Clarence would have found it far less exciting to discuss the prospects of ‘Raymond Rivers’ for an hour than to face the idea of Juliet exposed to his uncle’s criticism without his help. He flushed up and hesitated, while Alaric interposed—
'I'll tell you all about her, uncle, if you'll just go on to the hotel; I'll be with you in a minute.'

What would Mr. Belville think of the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' and oh! what would the 'Wills o' the Wisp' think of Mr. Belville? Words failed Clarence as he looked piteously up at Alaric with eyes that told more than he knew. He had had some hard moments in his life, but to be helpless and incapable in an emergency was altogether new to him. 'Help her;' he said at last; 'don't frighten her about it.'

Alaric, more and more uneasy at the evident increase of suffering, promised, and said everything comforting he could imagine. But before the dinner had been ordered, the presence of the great man had spread through the theatrical world of Clarebridge. Dolph had carried the news to the Quaking Cottage. Mr. Farquharson had rushed up to call at the hotel, and every soul in the theatre was in the state of mind described once for all when another London manager appeared in the audience of the immortal Vincent Crummles.

Lily Farquharson spent an extra half-hour in making herself up for Phoebe. Her father congratulated himself on the luck which showed him off in his beloved part of Jaques. Juliet somehow felt that she did not feel all the importance of the occasion as it deserved, and Alaric, when he made his appearance, looked as nervous as any one. He looked down at Juliet with an odd sort of smile.

'Look here,' he said, 'we have got to do Clarence credit. He is half-wild with anxiety. Mind you pull through.'

'I will,' said Juliet; and with that power of rising to the occasion which is in itself talent, she determined
not to lose her chance. Nervous anxiety, secret misery, the wrong Orlando, should not spoil her play. She showed at her very best, and conquered the situation.

'So, my dear,' said Mr. Belville afterwards, when he honoured the little theatre by asking for admission behind the scenes, 'you're fond of the theatre. Going to take to the profession in serious earnest?'

As Uncle Dick, laying his hand affectionately on Juliet's shoulder, asked her this question in a loud voice in the midst of her assembled family, the stage effect could hardly have been surpassed.

'That, sir,' said Juliet, looking him straight in the face, and speaking in her clearest voice, 'depends partly on your opinion of me.'

'H'm—h'm! Get some good technical training and come to me again in six months.'

Alaric knew that this was as conclusive as a manager would be, and if Juliet had hoped for something more, she did not show it.

'Thank you, Mr. Belville,' she said. 'I'll follow your advice exactly.'

'And here, you boy'—turning to Dolph—'you shouldn't be aiming at parts fit for your betters. Come up with Mr. Burnet, and if you choose to take your luck, and tumble about in my theatre, doing what comes handy, I'll let you see a little of real work. That's the best training for a lad—to make himself generally useful.'

'Thank you, sir—thank you, sir! I ain't a bit particular,' said Dolph radiantly. 'O Miss Juliet,' he said afterwards, 'we've learned a lot of experience, haven't we? I'd rather be a super in the Planet Company than play Puck or Prince Arthur all about—anywhere. My fortune's made!'
‘Well, Dolph,’ said Juliet gravely, ‘I suppose we have the chance of making it; we’ve made the plunge.’

But Miss Lily Farquharson said that Juliet was a viper, and Mr. Clinton told Dolph that he’d be nothing but a call-boy, while all the Willinghams were so taken aback by the offer, and her prompt acceptance of it, that they decided that night among themselves to say nothing at all to her till there was time to discuss it in peace.

‘She shan’t do it,’ said Lewis.

‘She will,’ said Selva to her husband; ‘she has meant it for long enough. There’s only one person who could stop her.’

‘Aunt Minnie?’

‘No; Clarence Burnet.’

Then Lewis, when he understood the course of his wife’s thoughts, flew into a passion, and swore at himself, and the ‘Wills o’ the Wisp,’ and the theatre, and Clarence Burnet.

He had to suppress his wrath for the present, for Dolph came running after them as they reached the Quaking Cottage.

‘Mr. Burnet’s much worse, my lady. A message came to hurry Mr. Lambourne, and the doctor says as how he can’t say now that there’s no danger.’

Dolph’s eyes were full of tears; and on this scanty intelligence Juliet had to sleep. It blotted out Mr. Belville’s encouragement. The next morning brought a hurried anxious note from Alaric, saying that the doctor had come early after a night of high fever, and pain so violent as to indicate possible cause for great uneasiness. He was very sorry to upset their plans once more, but he could not manage to play the two great parts properly in such anxiety, nor endure to
leave his cousin for so long. Mr. Belville, who was obliged to go back to town, would send down Clarence’s ‘under-study’ to take his place till the end of the week.

Sir Lewis, though inclined to think the anxiety rather over-strung, could only be thankful to get anybody in the emergency, and expressed a proper amount of regret and sympathy.

Clarence had not suggested this plan in the first instance, partly because he did not wish his uncle to know he was incapacitated, and partly because he did not think that his ‘under-study’ would prove acceptable to the Willinghams—that is to say, to Juliet.
CHAPTER XXIX

TOUCH AND GO

Dr. Webb having only arrived after Alaric had gone to the theatre, and then come out of the town to attend a critical case, had no message about Rigg; and on the next morning Miss Anne walked off to her G.F.S. friend to ask about the hospital, heard splendid compliments about Monday and Tuesday's performances, and found that she had happily hit on the day for admission of patients, and that the good lady could give a recommendation, wherewith she set forth, and, meeting the Major, asked him to escort her to obtain of the poor young man such particulars of name, age, and employment as were required.

The Major was looking annoyed. 'What do you think that ass, Buckley, has been doing?' he said. 'He wants me to back him in getting Lewis to have a benefit for him when he is to be Captain Absolute!'

'A benefit!'

'I told him it was all rot. If we once began that way, Farquharson and all the rest might be after it—and there would be no end to it, and then he growled and said we made him a mere drudge, and treated him like the dirt under our feet—didn't introduce him to the swells, nor get invitations for him. I declare if I hadn't said a line of the multipli-
cation table to meself, as my poor old mother begged me, I should have told him it was because he was such an intolerable snob—or something worse. And he couldn’t get Willingham to pay him, he said, not till the end of this business, when he balances accounts. What should he want with pay, I asked, when Willingham boards and lodges him; but all the answer I got was asking me to lend him five pounds.’

‘I hope you did not.’

‘Well—you see—I don’t know how it slipped out! I never meant man or mother’s son to know.’

‘You don’t mean that you did!’ said Miss Anne, not remarking that he had not transgressed this resolution.

‘Only on condition that he wasn’t to go bothering Lewis any more about benefits or such-like absurdity.’

‘O Major! As if it would hold him—the wretched boy. Oh! I wish you hadn’t!’

‘You see, I want some one to take care of me, and look after me. I say, Anne, won’t you be the one to take me in hand?’

‘I? Major, what are you thinking about?’

‘Of what I have been thinking ever since we set off on this scheme together,’ said the Major, ‘and I’ve got to see so much more of you. Come now, Anne, you know I’m not like a young lad, with the first freshness and sweetness to offer. That was all buried long ago in my poor darling’s grave; but there’s love enough and abounding for all that, and now I know what you are—I don’t think you would repent it if you would come and be the light of my little home.’

‘Oh dear! Oh dear! What will Minnie say?’ but she did not withdraw her hand.

‘She has all the rest of them, and she will see you
every day. There, you've as good as consented, and there's not a man in the place—no, nor in the three kingdoms—that's happier than Brian O'Connor!'

'But don't—don't be telling all these young folks while all this is going on,' Anne entreated:

'Will they be laughing at us, the spalpeens?'

'Oh! Minnie must know first. Besides, I couldn't—couldn't look those girls in the face. Don't let them guess—?

Nevertheless Miss Anne coloured as red as a peony, and fairly jumped to the other side of the pavement when they encountered Ernley Armytage striding along at full speed.

'Halloa, Major! Do you know where Buckley is?'

'I haven't seen him since just after breakfast.'

'Rehearsal at two for Burnet's substitute from London, and now there's another scene shaky—'

'The less he sees to a scene the better, I should say,' returned Miss Anne, who had collected herself.

'So should I; but they are at a dead-lock. Willingham is ready to tear his hair. Lambourne's no good to-day, evidently. I believe we are all coming to grief together! Where can he be?'

'Ha! Dolph,' as the boy was seen rushing up the street with a big folding screen on his back—looking like a print of Samson with the gates of Gaza. 'Did Mr. Buckley send that?'

'No, sir. Sir Lewis thought it might come in, and I fetched it from the cottage,' said the breathless Dolph, pausing in his course. 'I saw Mr. Buckley getting into a waggonette for the races with a lot of fellows, and says he, "You tell Sir Lewis that I'm up in this part, you imp," says he. Those were his words, ma'am, not civil unless it was theatrical, and so—Exeunt. I
went to poor Mr. Rigg to ask what we could do, and he says belike if we went cap-in-hand, so to speak, to Mr. Terry, and told him Mr. Buckley was not in the theatre, maybe he would condescend to serve our turn. So I was going to tell Sir Lewis——'

'That's right, Dolph! Old Belville knew what he was about to nail that boy!' said the Major. 'But oh! that idiot, that pig-headed idiot. If ever you catch me lending him five pounds again, I'll give you leave to call me black-hearted traitor!'

'It was a great mistake to let him get mixed up with us,' said Miss Anne. 'This sort of thing brings out whether a man has the instincts of a gentleman.'

'The instincts of a dirty little scorpion,' returned the Major.

The boy was in such breathless haste that they had not stopped him to ask after his patient, whom Miss Dorset saw for the first time. He was in a wretched attic of a house that had once seen better days, in an atmosphere of sour stuffiness, where he lay in a grimy-looking bed, with nothing tolerable about it but a cup of cold tea, and a peach in a saucer, peeled and divided neatly—no doubt Dolph's work. The poor fellow was in great pain, and was less communicative than the Major had found him the night before, especially about his name, age, and domicile.

'There's something wrong about him,' said the Major, as the two emerged into the fresher air of the street. 'I don't believe that was his real name.'

'I am afraid not,' sighed Miss Anne, 'but that he is terribly ill is quite certain.'

'He is a runaway, I should say,' added Major O'Connor. 'Deserter, perhaps.'
'But anyway he must be got to the hospital without loss of time.'

'Nothing more certain.'

So while Miss Dorset trotted off with the paper filled up, her Major went in quest of a conveyance; and the two good souls never rested, hardly even thought of the momentous passage between themselves during the rest of that bustling day of rehearsing and of acting, a day which burnt itself in on Juliet's memory. Alaric appeared at the theatre for a minute, making apologies for his defection, unable to think of anything but his cousin's state—apologies which the actors were too much hurried to pay much heed to. Lewis hoped politely that he soon would have a better report to give; there was no use, at such moments, in giving way to anxiety.

'I hope I am too anxious,' said Alaric, with a half-smile, 'he has been trying to tell me so.'

As he spoke he met Juliet's eyes, full of a terror more than answering to his own. She stopped him as he turned away, and put her hand on his arm.

'It was for me—instead of me,' she said, in a voice blunt with suppressed feeling.

'Oh no,' said Alaric, laying his own hand on the trembling fingers. 'Don't let me frighten you. I'm always as nervous as a cat if anything's wrong. There is every probability of the alarm passing over. I have not telegraphed yet to any one. Once, he nursed me all day at Monks' Warren, and played in London every night. He wouldn't have deserted you. But I'm not made of such good stuff. I'll let you hear.'

He gave her hand a tight squeeze and went off; while Juliet, with her heart aching and throbbing, envying him for being able to see as well as hear,
proved that she was made of good strong stuff, by turning back to mind her business, and receive the new actor.

The thing had got to be done.

'Mr. Frank Howard, of the Planet Theatre,' came down in time for the rehearsal, evidently delighted at his superior's accident, and hardly able to express decent regret at his alarming condition. A similar sentiment filled the breast of the indignant property man, whom Lady Willingham had coaxed back to his place by humble pie, sweetened with Irish eloquence. 'That there gent's meddling' had brought about a proper reward. 'That there gent' did not appear all through the rehearsal in which Clinton had to take the part of Paris; but just as the curtain was about to draw up, in he dashed, with a shout of 'Right as a trivet, boss; ready in ten minutes.'

Lewis's wrath had been working itself up to red-heat all day, and now he turned round sharply, and told Buckley that he needn't hurry himself. As Clinton had rehearsed with Howard, he should take the part now.

'Especially,' he added, noting George's loud and excited manner, and speaking with haughty displeasure, as to an offending subordinate, 'especially as I don't think you're fit to make your appearance. You had better go home and go to bed.'

George flared up, declaring with extremely forcible language that he wasn't going to be insulted; that Burnet's jealousy had spoiled his part, and Lambourne was altogether inefficient—now he had a chance for the first time.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' said old Farquharson, in a tone which checked Lewis's angry interruption, 'defer
your private disputes till the representation is over,
and the public satisfied. Clear the stage at once.'

Buckley dashed off in a fury, and rushed into the
green-room, where Juliet and Agnes were waiting.

'Juliet,' he cried, 'now I'm no longer suppressed
by Burnet's confounded conceit and insolence, I can
show my mettle. I joined the company for your sake.
Am I to be insulted before a beggarly actor?'

'Mr. Buckley,' said Juliet sharply, 'I don't know
what you are talking about; but you have done too
much mischief already for me to have any sympathy
for your grievances.'

George turned a look on her which, through all his
foolish, half-tipsy fury came from his heart.

'That's—that's enough,' he stammered, and went
off without another word, having helped to give Mr.
Frank Howard this specimen of the amateur manager's
method of conducting his theatre. The new-comer
was in high spirits; he was quite efficient in his way,
and had contrived to give himself that sort of likeness
to Clarence's style and appearance often to be ob-
served in the subordinates of a theatre to their heads.
Clarence Burnet was intense and forcible; so Frank
Howard tore passion to tatters with the addition of a
Cockney accent of the most inveterate kind. He was
an old acquaintance of Lily Farquharson and of most
of the company, and there was a good deal of joking
about 'the deacon,' which Miss Lily explained to
Juliet.

'That's Burnet's nickname, my dear, because his
father's a minister, and he's so stiff and unsociable,
and don't care for a bit of fun. Oh, it's fine to be
related to a manager!—or to take his fancy.'

'I daresay Mr. Burnet quite deserves his nick-
name,' said Juliet, in a tone incomprehensible to her hearer.

A sick loathing seized upon her.

'How can I—how can I?' she thought; the next moment she had pulled herself together; the spirit of her calling came upon her; she forgot Clarence Burnet; forgot Frank Howard, and played as she had never played before.

When on their way home they stopped for a moment at the door of Clarence's lodging for the last news of him, Alaric appeared, still pale and anxious.

'Hush,' he said, 'don't let him hear you. I hope he is asleep—certainly no worse. Performance all right? He might ask me.'

It was something to be able to say that after all it had been a success.

Alaric smiled a little.

'So glad I can tell him so,' he said, as he turned away.

On the ensuing morning no Buckley appeared at breakfast, and Lewis began to remember uncomfortably the high words which had passed. Just as Selva had observed that she could not sit any longer like a statue behind the quaking urn, Dolph appeared with a note for his master.

'Mr. George H. Buckley begs to inform Sir Lewis Willingham that after what passed last night he can no longer continue a member of a company which he always understood to be on friendly, non-professional terms. A few small items of accounts can be discharged from the salary due to Mr. Buckley.'

'The unmitigated brute!' exclaimed Lewis, throwing the missive across to his wife.
There was a general outcry, ending in, 'Where is he gone!'

'Home, I hope,' said Lewis. 'Here's a letter from his father to say things are looking up. There's a strike at Awnmouth, and the trade is drifting back to us, and he wants George. So I trust it is only a matter of bearishness. I shall go and see how Burnet is—I'd no time to think of him yesterday—and whether Lambourne has any suggestions.'

Alaric came in with a clearer brow; his cousin had had a better night; the fever had much lessened, and he thought that the corner was turned.

'He has been telling me that I have been getting up a sensation about nothing,' he said; 'but that's not quite so. Webb was very uneasy for a few hours. But does Miss Dorset still want the doctor sent to her patient, or has she got him to the hospital.'

'To the hospital. In fact, I am glad he is off our hands so far. There's plainly something wrong about him. Can you throw any light on him? Dolph says that the man states that he has heard Mr. Burnet's father and brother both preach. And they have wormed out of him at the hospital that he was hurt in a railway accident just before he came here.'

'Indeed!' and Alaric's face lighted up. 'Very likely. Poor lad! Where is the hospital. I must see him.'

'I hope I have not put the hounds of justice on his scent,' said Lewis.

'That's not my line—hounds neither literal nor metaphorical, I'm afraid, squire though I be,' said Alaric, laughing. 'But what is this poor fellow like?'

'A big youth with a north-country accent and
some cultivation—told Dolph he had read Shakespeare before he came here.'

'Ah!' said Alaric, 'I must go after him. Clarence will think I am getting a rest.'

An hour or so afterwards Agnes encountered him, hurrying up the street.

'It is as I thought, Miss Willingham,' he said gravely. 'I know the poor lad well. I fear it is touch and go with him, and I found that jolly little Samaritan Dolph writing a letter for him to his mother to say that an operation had been decided on. So I've telegraphed to Mr. Merrifield.'

'Mr. Merrifield?' said Agnes.

'Yes. This lad came from Coalham to Monks' Warren. He has no end of good stuff in him, but he, with others, got into an awkward scrape, and ran away, taking a Monks' Warren boy with him. When Mr. Merrifield came to our church opening, he and Clarence were in a railway accident, which, by the way, poor Clarence went through all over again when he was light-headed, and mixed it up with the smash here. Mr. Merrifield, with great pluck, saved the Monks' Warren boy's life. But this one, though hurt, managed to get away. I haven't made out all the story, but I am thankful to find him, and now he is glad to be found, and says he knew he had been unfriendly,' concluded Alaric, with moist eyes, as he hurried away, leaving Agnes with heart beating with pleasure at hearing David Merrifield's name again.
CHAPTER XXX

A THUNDERBOLT

ELIZABETH MERRIFIELD had been invited to join her uncle and aunt, Sir Jasper and Lady Merrifield, and pay a visit at Beechcroft as soon as the festivities at Rotherwood were over.

A wonderful old-world place it seemed to her. She had always thought her own home behind the world, and thus a haven of rest; but it was nothing to Beechcroft Court. The entrance through broad nail-studded doors to a great paved court before the stone steps to the front door; the big square gray house with its many windows; the wide hall; the shallow, shining, slippery stair; the wainscoted rooms; the odd chimney-pieces, with ugly caryatides, all painted white and gilded by ancestral bad taste, which no one had cared to undo; the bowling-green in front, with the ancient tulip-tree now, alas, dying by inches; the old walled garden, with mulberry trees of untold antiquity, and plants equally ancient in ancestry, and lost to most gardens of modern date, to which Lady Merrifield hastened as the friends of her life, to obtain slips to make her new abode homelike. The rooks, which wheeled about and cawed their evening notes as the sinking sun shone on the gold-besprinkled elms, seemed only to enhance the quëtude, as the cows
paced in regular line beneath them back from being milked.

There was the same restful air about the little old church, with the green mouldering heaps and lichenened headstones round. There were crosses, and there were flowers, but no glass cases over tinfoil wreaths—abominations kept out by the Squire and late parson with all their might. Within, all was in beautiful quiet order, the renovations of forty or fifty years back left intact, or only kept fresh, so that there was that venerable yet living air so peculiar to our English institutions, grave yet bright. The services, and the good old gray-haired curate still in charge, were all in keeping, and Bessie could not help thinking it was hard to make him give place to a youthful Mr. Brisk, such as she believed her cousin Harry to be.

The servants at the Court were none of them novelties either; slow and steady and soft-footed, looking down on any one with less than twenty years' service, unless the child of one of the appendages of the estate, who had apparently been there for as many generations as the Mohuns themselves.

Indeed, the furniture and belongings had an appearance of time and wear, and there was an economy in the arrangements consequent on the not having the heart to turn any one off, or deny maintenance to inefficient old age and faithfulness.

The master of the house was a silent, resolute man, active and thorough as a country gentleman and farmer, but not caring for modern literature, and very slowly admitting innovations; while his wife was a gentle, wise-hearted and active-minded invalid, too much crippled by rheumatism to move about, though her direction pervaded everything. His ruddy close-shaven
face and gray head, and her placid pale countenance framed in soft white curls, seemed to Bessie almost as much fossils as the rest of the place, to her a sort of living Pompeii.

Mr. Mohun seemed to feel a sort of good-natured pity for his brother and sister for having been torn up by the roots and drifted about the world, out of reach of the caws of their own rooks, and the charms of their own river, which certainly Lady Merrifield enjoyed to the utmost, fitting herself in as if she had never gone away, and with still a certain sweet awe and deference to her once formidable eldest brother, and a fear lest her impulsive daughters, Gillian and Mysie, should transgress any of the tacit rules of the house.

William Mohun, however, the youngest of the family by many years, and as much spoilt as was possible to such parents, was essentially modern and lively, and on the evening spent at Beechcroft by Major O'Connor and Mr. Armytage the young people gathered round a table at the far end of the great drawing-room, and there chattered and laughed over the anniversary, and played paper games to their hearts' content.

Bessie made one of them, having an intuition that the elders would get on better without her in the examination of the Major upon the Willingham family, while General Mohun, who hated games, ensconced himself behind a newspaper, and, having been walking over stubble fields and in covers all day long, fell sound asleep.

The Major, when asked about the 'Wills,' was half paternal, half enthusiastic.

'I have known them all my life. My first commission was in Sir Lewis's regiment—old Willingham,
father to these children. He was a father to all of us boys, so was his wife.'

Lady Merrifield smiled, not at the bull, but at the recollections it awakened, and Mrs. Mohun said, 'He is a baronet, I think.'

'Yes, worse luck. Estates went to a skinflint of an heiress, and they are only encumbered with the handle to their name.' Then the Major went on to explain how the Dorset connection had led to the elder Sir Lewis involving himself in the Bank and Shipping Agency, and the downfall on his death 'by no fault of this boy—not a bit of it; and I believe the thing will get up again. But in the meantime there was nothing for him to do, nor to live upon, poor boy, so as we had been acting all about the neighbourhood for love, he thought we might as well do it for money—turn the one talent to account, and small blame to him.'

'It is not the way a man like him would once have taken,' said the Squire, 'especially if it involved the ladies of his family.'

'Times are changed, not a doubt of it,' said the Major. 'And what could the poor lad do? And, you see, as long as we can keep it to ourselves, so to say, there's no harm in it for the girls, poor dears!'

'That is your reason for going with them?' said Sir Jasper.

'Well, you see their father was very good to me when I was a raw lad, so what could I do but look after them? I'm no good at a part, except a matter of Sir Lucius O'Trigger—or any Irishman they don't make themselves too great fools over—but, at least, I can keep out some low-bred fellow that might be offensive, such as have to fill up the inferior parts.'

'How very kind of you,' said one of the ladies.
'For the matter of that,' said the Major modestly, 'time is nothing to me, more's the pity, and one gets one's heart into a—a set like that,' and a sort of colour came into his brown old face as he hesitated a little.

'I see,' put in Lady Merrifield, 'the young ladies are as much and as kindly guarded between you, their sister-in-law, and their good old aunt, as if they were at home.'

'You may say that,' returned the Major. 'As to her little ladyship, she's younger than either of them, just a sweet merry Irish darling, not but that she's got pith in her pretty little head.'

'Ah, it is the aunt! I thought so!' 'And you thought right. She's a woman of a thousand; can enjoy and be up to the fun and yet guard——'

'All the better for enjoying,' said Lady Merrifield.

'Right for you, Lady Merrifield!' cried the Major, striking his knee enthusiastically, hardly able to repress the communication of his own happiness; and, indeed, perhaps Lady Merrifield divined it, but she was more anxious to hear of the niece than of the aunt. 'I thought the one who acted Arbell—the pretty one—had a charming face, but rather passive. It suited the part of the poor perplexed heiress, but she kept it even when not acting.'

'Lewis made the part to fit his sister,' said the Major. 'Poor little Agnes, she's not like her cousin, to whom this is just meat and drink, so that you'd think the stage her native element. I believe Agnes does it all right against the grain—not that she has ever said a word to me, mind you.'

'Is it not hard on her to be dragged into it?' asked Mrs. Mohun.
'So it is, I've no doubt, nor that she thinks it a misfortune to have a pretty face and sweet voice, so that they can't do without her. 'Tis among poor folk that she and her aunt are happy. If they weren't running off this morning to see after a poor carpenter in the hospital who got hurt! And for that boy who did the gossoon; why, 'tis they have made him nigher to an angel than the other thing. 'Twas he that has got the poor scamp of a fellow to write home to his friends, when to nobody else would he so much as open his lips.'

'The boy? The gossoon? Is he a pupil of Miss Willingham's?' asked Lady Merrifield, rather confused.

'A Sunday-school pupil,' he replied. 'Oh yes. Agnes is a good girl; a blessing to all that come near her!'

Mr. Armytage gave much the same testimony. Perhaps he divined why Sir Jasper managed, on their walk to the coverts, to question him about the Willingham's; but he had a generous soul, which would have scorned to depreciate, or even complain of, the maiden who had tacitly rejected him, and besides, the first soreness had begun to pass away, and there was a certain reaction setting in, so that he freely declared Miss Willingham to be 'one of the very best girls in the world (he did not say the best, as he would have done a few weeks ago), only really now a little too high-flown; no, he didn't mean that exactly, but too religious and romantic for this style of thing—the sort of girl that was never happy unless she was in a sisterhood or a clergyman's wife, you know,' and there Ernley's honest sunburnt face flushed up as if he had been guilty of a personality; but the good fellow was far happier for having so spoken; and when the
younger ladies brought out luncheon to the shooting party on the pleasant slope of a sunny bank, with the charm of St. Martin's summer on the glowing woods, he talked and made merry with a free heart. He applied himself to nutting with Gillian, pulling down the branches for her so recklessly as to make the Squire cry out for his hazels. Then they discussed wholesome and unwholesome fungi, and when Gillian had screamed in horror at his proposing to eat a beautiful crimson agaric all over cream-coloured dots, like pearl pins in a satin cushion, and had herself declared in all seriousness that a thing with a brown top and spongy yellow underside was wholesome and delicious, they had a lively combat of nonsense, which sent him home deciding that if not so grand and beautiful, this same Gillian Merrifield was much jollier than grave Agnes —allegra instead of penserosa, perhaps.

However, as the two agreed on their way home, they must stick to the 'Wills' as long as the present arrangement lasted, though it was hard to see how it could do so. Either the 'Wills' must join a regular company (if they could), or give up all except occasional recitals, and both expressed a fervent hope that Lewis would be content with the latter plan.

'Once in a way is all very well,' said Ernley; 'but a fellow can't go on like this if he has anything to do at home; and I have hopes of a ship. However, I won't throw Willingham over like that cad, Buckley, if he really wants me on occasion, though such a spell as this is makes one fairly sick of it, being bullied and ordered about by those actors too.'

The Major did not reciprocate this last sentiment, having acquired a new interest; and Ernley began presently to wonder whether 'those girls' would come
over for their last day. He had promised to show them all the dodges behind the scenes, which they were very curious about. The Major could not help suspecting that the plural pronoun might have been the singular. In fact, Gillian Merrifield was showing herself so eager to see the last representation at Clare-bridge that her cousin Elizabeth offered to take her and Mysie, and sleep there, saying that it would be a great pleasure to her to see both the play and Agnes Willingham.

'Only this silly child must not take the infection,' said Lady Merrifield laughing.

'And, my dear,' added Mrs. Mohun, 'if your friend could be spared, and you could bring her back with you for a day or two, it would be very pleasant for all of us.'

To which Elizabeth fully agreed, and at the moment there was a clatter of horses' feet, and Mysie dashed in for a moment to say that 'Phyllis and Cousin Rotherwood had ridden over,' and then she burst away again to meet them in the court, certainly not in the style of calm repose of the ancient nest of Beechcroft Court.

In came Lord Rotherwood alone.

'Such a peaceful spectacle as you are, Alethea, is good for sair een,' he said, 'after all our turmoil, and of course it has only made us crazier still. Nothing will satisfy that Fly of mine but she must see these 'Wills o' the Wisp' on their own ground.'

'Exactly the case with my girls,' said Lady Merrifield.

'So the child has nearly got her own way. *Her* mother can't go, as she has guests on her hands—that awful dowager, you know, and Florence is off to a
meeting, but she consents to my taking her, provided I am backed by some responsible womankind! So we came over here to beseech for it.'

'Just,' said Lady Merrifield, 'as I was in the act of consenting to let Gillian and Mysie go under their cousin Bessie's kind protection! Is she responsible enough?'

Bessie looked up and laughed, and Lord Rotherwood put on a grave look, and said—

'Under the circumstances, I think I may assure my wife that we shall be sufficiently restrained from committing any aberrations, if Miss Merrifield will undertake to give us her countenance.'

To which Bessie agreed, and the time of meeting at the station was duly fixed, and a note written to secure 'the fustiest of boxes,' as Lord Rotherwood said; also Mrs. Mohun had begun her polite invitation to Miss Willingham, when the Squire marched into the room and laid a letter before her.

His affectionate and grateful nephew Henry Merrifield declined the presentation to the Rectory of Beechcroft, being resolved to devote himself to the missions in Ceylon, and, moreover, as his uncle would hear from home, having engaged himself to the lady doctor with whom he had sailed.

His letters were of course gone home, but the tidings could not but pervade the house before ten minutes were over; and Elizabeth sat wondering how Agnes was to hear them, and whether they would almost break her heart. No one, except the mother, could help acquiescing in Sir Jasper's observation that it was just what might have been foreseen. It was always the way with those boys.
CHAPTER XXXI

HIS BRIGHT PARTICULAR STAR

On the Sunday afternoon after that week of anxiety and excitement, Juliet Willingham went out by herself in search of solitude and an opportunity for reflection. It was one of the days of still, warm sunshine that come after the frosty nights of October; the trees had not lost their russet tints; the sky was blue, and over everything there was a sense of peace.

Juliet walked away from the town along a pleasant road which, raised a little on a low hill-side, looked over a space of pretty commonplace country, now veiled and softened by the autumnal haze. She sat down on a bench which was placed under a group of trees a mile or so out of the town, the church-tower of which formed an object in the landscape. A blue line of smoke and a distant rattle showed the afternoon train, which, last Sunday, had brought Lewis back from London. This had been a more peaceful Sabbath; but Juliet was very tired; she had been under a great strain of effort and feeling, aggravated by the fuzz and bustle of the small quarters at the Quaking Cottage, and by the worry of anxiety about George Buckley, who had not turned up at his father's house, and whose fortunes were much on Lewis's mind.

Juliet sat still, enjoying the solitude and silence.
The moment was approaching on which she had long fixed in her own mind to tell her family of her intention to adopt the stage as a profession. Mr. Belville's words were a distinct encouragement, and she knew that Clarence, though he had avoided the subject, had some plan in his mind as to the way in which she could enter on her preparation. She knew that for an outsider she had an exceptionally good chance, and, though she was as well aware, as without further experience she could be, of the kind of difficulties likely to await her, she was firmly convinced that the sacrifice was for her worth while, and that true maidenliness consisted, not in shrinking from disagreeables, but in steering her way bravely and sensibly through them.

Even while her heart swelled at the thought of Aunt Minnie and home, she knew that the home life would be intolerable to her, since she was in no way necessary to the two sisters (the Major's views had never dawned on her imagination). She must obey her call and do what she was meant to do. She had made up her mind, and, though she had always been a far less religious girl than Agnes, the effort of the decision had so deepened her whole nature that she had now prayed earnestly for help and guidance, feeling the need of it as she had never done before.

She had made up her mind, and nothing she thought would make her alter it. Nothing? Could she ask Clarence Burnet now to help her; could she leave home and friends and step out into his world now? Every inherited and inborn instinct within her made her feel that she must go home to Aunt Minnie and—wait. How could she ask for, or even accept, his comradeship and his help, if he wanted so much more from her, or
if, still worse, he did not want it, while she——? What was one dark, passionate gaze, at such a moment, to build on either way? And how could girls work with men at all, if such considerations were to upset their arrangements?

The idea that Clarence Burnet could be her lover had, when it first glanced across her mind, startled her exceedingly. All the considerations which her relations were whispering to each other lay dormant in her mind. She would fain have denied her own feelings and his. But Juliet's scheme of life led her to face facts, and she surely knew that she loved him. He had deepened and widened the world for her; but even while she tried to 'look at it sensibly,' all the unusual elements in the matter only made her feel the more that the next step must be his.

Of course if her indifference, or his indifference, could be satisfactorily established, the whole matter might be ignored, and she could proceed with her purpose. But it was so unlucky that she could not see him. Here she rose with a start, for along the road came Alaric Lambourne, with a lady beside him. Juliet's plans all went out of her head. Now she would know if he was really better.

Alaric stopped with a cordial greeting. 'Here is my wife,' he said. 'She did not think Clarence and I were capable of looking after each other, so she came yesterday to keep us in order.'

'I did not know what foolish things he might do, Miss Willingham,' said Mrs. Lambourne. 'I could have better trusted his cousin to look after him.'

'How is Mr. Burnet?' said Juliet, anxious to get the important question properly put without delay.

'Really better,' said Alaric. 'He is up on the sofa
to-day. I am going to carry him off soon to Monks' Warren, for he mustn't use his knee for some time; but I want to stay till poor Randall's operation is over. So I hope "As You Like It" to-morrow will be a success. I'll try and make a better hand of Orlando this time.'

'I am very glad you can play,' said Juliet, 'for Lord Rotherwood and some of his cousins are coming over for it, and I'm sure they would rather see you than Mr. Howard.'

'Oh,' said Alaric, 'I'm frightfully out of practice. It would drive Clarence frantic to see me.'

'He says you play Orlando much better than he does.'

'Ah, but we know better, don't we?' said Alaric with a smile. 'Emily, we ought to be turning. Are you on your way back, Miss Willingham?'

Juliet walked back beside them, and Alaric talked congenially of dramatic topics. Both he and his wife were pleasant and friendly, so that Juliet began to feel at her ease, and put questions much to the point as to the reading given by Miss Ellen Terry of the great Shakesporean part then before the public.

As they came back they encountered Lewis and Selva also returning from a Sunday stroll, and, at the door of their lodging Mrs. Lambourne asked Lady Willingham if she would come in for a few minutes and see Clarence, who was equal to a short visit, and would be glad to see his friends.

'Come and report on me, Miss Juliet,' said Alaric, as he went on before them, and in a minute or two Juliet found herself in the front drawing-room of the lodging-house, where Clarence lay on a sofa by the fire, with his left arm in a sling, and his eyes looking
blacker than ever. He hardly spoke a word, except to say that he was much better, and Selva made commonplace talk with the Lambournes, while Markham brought in the tea, and Lewis looked rather stiff and ill at ease. Presently Clarence asked him if he had heard anything of Buckley.

'No. It is impossible to say what fool's trick he may have been up to. This is the first time I've had a chance of expressing what we all owe to you, Burnet; I am sure my cousin feels deeply what you saved her from, and we regret exceedingly that you suffered so much yourself.'

There was an indefinable stiffness in Lewis's manner as he made this proper acknowledgment which struck on Clarence's keen ears at once.

'I daresay I might have managed it better,' he said coldly. 'I ought to have seen that the scene was shaky. Then perhaps I shouldn't have knocked it down.'

He did not look well enough for much company, and, after drinking a cup of tea, Selva rose to take leave, and backed up her husband by a pretty little speech to Clarence about all the many ways in which he had helped them, and, if this was good-bye before they all went back to Ousehaven, she must thank him for all his kindness. She did thank him, but she contrived to convey a sense of conclusion to the intimacy in every word.

'I only did what I undertook to do, Lady Willingham,' said Clarence. 'I regret that I have been unable to fulfil my engagement to the end.'

'Now,' said Alaric quaintly, 'if any one echoes that sentiment it won't be civil to me.'

Under cover of the laugh thus raised the visitors departed. Juliet was tongue-tied and spell-bound; but
her straightforward young fingers gave Clarence's a warm pressure even while she could not speak or look, and at the door she suddenly turned and darted back again.

'Mr. Burnet, I thank you a great deal more for all your teaching than for anything else, and—if I get on really, it will be owing to you.'

She was gone before he could speak, while Clarence lay back flushed and breathless, and Alaric and his wife looked at one another in silence. Mrs. Lambourne shook her head. She had tried the little experiment at her husband's suggestion, but she could not think the result satisfactory. Presently she took up her jacket and went away, while Alaric moved over to the sofa, and sat down by it.

'Now,' he said, 'my dear old boy, you are going to tell me all about it.'

'Since you ask—I suppose you know,' said Clarence gruffly.

'When did it begin?' asked Alaric.

'On the first day I ever saw her. There's nothing to be said, Alaric. I went into it with my eyes open. Now, I must pay for my whistle. There's nothing to say; I understand all about it. Of course such an idea never crossed their minds as a possibility. Their point of view is perfectly natural, no doubt.'

'I should think that the young lady's intention of going on the stage might modify it.'

'They can't loathe the idea more than I do,' burst out Clarence with vehemence.

'That's rather a complication.'

'Her heart is set on it! Neither I nor any one else has a right to stop her. And I had thought of how it might be managed for her. Miss Lascelles,
you know, lives with her mother in Kensington; she coaches beginners; she is a very good sort, and would take proper care of her, and use interest for her too. And now Belville has taken a fancy to her. You see—if—if—I wasn’t a fool, I could look after her better than any one else could—if she must do it."

‘But could not you look after her still better, since you are—as you say—a fool—about her?’ suggested Alaric.

‘I am certain of her absolute and entire indifference to me!’

‘Oh, well, you can’t get “back of that,” anyhow, if that’s the case.’

‘You don’t understand,’ said Clarence, more gently, after a silence. ‘She is utterly single-minded. She has set this object before her, and she has the power to carry it out. She isn’t unpractical. She thinks she faces the difficulties. She thinks she knows all about it. Good heavens! to think she ever should know! Not that she could be hurt—that’s impossible—but that she should be exposed to all the rough and tumble of stage-life—that she should have to fight her way to success! It’s maddening!’

‘And so you don’t think they guess your feelings?’ said Alaric, without a direct reply.

‘They did not. They would as soon have suspected Rigg! They never did suspect that poor fool Buckley, because he isn’t of their own sort; but after all the sense was knocked out of me—I don’t know—. But they’ll forget it, or think it a temporary infatuation. I suppose I can do what I promised for her, and hold my tongue. You might propose the plan to her; she is sure to ask your advice at any rate.’
'I don't see that view exactly,' said Alaric, putting his hand on Clarence's shoulder.

'There is another,' said Clarence, with a change of tone. 'I might say to her, "You know all the facts," —taking care that she did know—"but there's nothing in my life that I am ashamed to show you. I understand you, and love you as no one else can, and I am as fit as others to be your choice. I own no barrier that ought to divide us. I feel myself to be your equal——"'

'Well?' said Alaric gently.

'That's what I should say in another case—but, to her—— Alaric, if you think the thing too unsuitable——'

Clarence's voice shook a little; his formal language had done little justice to his feelings; but he checked Alaric's reply, and went on——

'What would your wife think? Don't soften any of it away.'

'Now just listen quietly,' said Alaric, 'and you shall hear what we do think. As to your profession, you will be able to offer your wife quite as good a prospect as most professional men without private fortune; and certainly Juliet will have no prejudice on that score. As to your family—you are not accustomed to a close daily intercourse with them; there is nothing whatever to be ashamed of——'

'Nothing,' interposed Clarence.

'While you know that Emily and I——'

'Your position in no way affects mine,' broke in Clarence. 'I know that peaches—and butlers—are likely to create a false impression; but I will not have any misunderstanding of that sort!'

'What you vividly describe as peaches and butlers,'
replied Alaric, 'by which I suppose you mean your relationship to me, does alter the situation; because, usually, if a woman marries a man—'

'Beneath her.'

'With different antecedents, she often loses the kind of society to which she has been accustomed. That—if you'll allow me to say so—my wife would never allow to be the case with yours.'

There was a silence, then Clarence said, in a low strained voice—

'We have not touched on the real point, you know. When I most resented class distinctions, I never denied but that they had created real ones. You know—more likely you don't know—how I used to compare myself with you. It's my trade, of course, to notice. I would rather be content to serve her at a distance than allow her to mistake—'

Clarence finished lamely enough, while Alaric sprang up, and burst out—

'Upon my soul, Clarence! one would think you were a Legitimist refugee! There is no sort of reason why you should not come forward, and if the girl is fool enough to refuse you, that's her own look-out. Don't exaggerate the infernal system which is responsible for half the evil in the country, and which can be defended on no grounds of Christianity or of common justice. The iron has entered even into your soul—'

'If you talk in that way, Alaric,' said his wife, coming in and standing beside him, 'you will make the Willinghams think Clarence's principles are a great deal worse than his profession. There are exceptions to every rule, and this is an exceptional case. I will tell you what I shall do. I shall ask Sir Lewis and
Lady Willingham to bring Juliet to stay with us by and by, when Clarence is well, and the Planet play is started. Then she can see how it is all round. And now you had better help Clarence back to his room; he is much too tired to discuss socialism. And as for not coming forward, it is evident that they guess how it is, so he has no choice left him.'

'Do you really think so, Emily?' said Clarence eagerly.

'Yes, I do; and to-morrow you shall tell me all about it. Juliet is very pretty, and looks original. I think I shall like her very much.'

This delightful tone of anticipation almost took Clarence's breath away; but it was more consolatory than all Alaric's arguments, and he quite forgot the assertion of Juliet's indifference with which he had begun the discussion, and which, if accurate, would have rendered it superfluous.

When Alaric came back after helping him into his room, and doing all he could for his comfort, his wife went on in her soft, deliberate tones—

'You know, Alaric, they are sure to be startled, but when they come really to know Clarence, they will see how it is.'

'They ought to see that he is one of a thousand, in any rank of life,' said Alaric.

'Yes; and then he has learnt your ways, instead of the ways of some one just a little better than his own original people. When you say that you can do nothing, I always think that at least you made a gentleman of Clarence.'

'I did not, Emily. I may have helped the gentle spirit to free itself from baser elements. That is something perhaps. Can it only be done once?'
'You see, you have always been so fond of one another,' said Emily thoughtfully.

'Yes,' said Alaric gravely. 'Love does make all things new—even society. I haven't half enough of it. But there! I believe the poor dear old boy would be in quite as great a taking if he was the son of a hundred earls! He is romantic enough for a knight-errant. I hope that little bright-eyed, wilful thing is good enough for him. I hope she does care about him. He has suffered badly over the business already!'

'She is so fond of acting—that would be an attraction.'

'I hope she is fond enough of him to give up acting for his sake, if he wishes it. She wouldn't be a woman worth having if she only took him as an adjunct to her career.'

'Well, Alaric, for an actor and a radical, that's a very old-fashioned sentiment. There's the bell! I am going to evening church. Now, you are to read to Clarence, and not to let him say another word about Juliet.'
CHAPTER XXXII

THE YORKSHIREMAN'S MAGNANIMITY

CLARENCE, somewhat cheered by his cousin’s encouragement, got into the sitting-room on the next morning in time to see Juliet arrive at the theatre for an extra rehearsal with Alaric of the evening performance. He watched her slight figure in its dark tweed dress come rapidly up the street alone, and make her way through the passengers. It was market day, and the town was full, and his lover’s imagination pictured her, alone, on her way to her work, on many another day, on days that would be cold and dismal, amid crowds that would be rough and careless, while he—— Mrs. Lambourne was out, and he was left to watch the theatre doors as he lay on his sofa by the window, until his not very profitable reflections were startled away by the sudden announcement of 'Sir Lewis Willingham,' who entered, looking hurried and anxious.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you too early,' he said; 'but here is a very awkward piece of business, in which perhaps you may be able to advise us. Buckley has never gone home. Here's a frantic letter from his father, besides half a dozen absurd bills which he has left behind him. He has been so thick with Clinton lately, that I thought he might know something of his proceedings, so I looked him up; he's
mostly sober at this time of day. However, I could get nothing out of him.'

'He's an uncommon bad lot,' said Clarence. 'Had Buckley any money?'

'Five pounds which the Major was ass enough to lend him. My wife says she hopes he will have to beg his way back to Ousehaven in rags and tatters. I believe the best thing would be to leave him to come to his senses, but I don't know what line his father will take, and there'll be misery at his home.'

'It's unlucky,' said Clarence; 'but they won't hear of my going back to London till the end of next week at earliest. Howard will have to take the first rehearsal for me. I suppose Clinton wouldn't come up here to be pumped. Let me see. Where had he a London engagement last year? Oh, at the "Duchess." I know a man there; I'll send a line and tell him to look out. Could you find some writing things for me on that table? Thanks. It's bad to be one armed as well as one legged, but I can manage.' He pencilled two or three lines, and directed Lewis how to address them, adding, 'Buckley's a good-looking fellow. If Clinton has given him a leg up, he might get taken on. Anyway, I should think he would apply there.'

Clarence leant back, as if a little tired with the effort of writing, then said, 'There's another thing. About Dolph, my uncle was quite in earnest with his offer. Are you willing for the boy to accept it?'

'Needs must,' said Lewis. 'The ladies see that there is no use in clipping his wings, and, for my part, I haven't so high an opinion of the Ousehaven shop-boys as to think he'll be worse off at the Planet than in their company.'

'Then,' said Clarence, 'I think I can arrange for
him to be safely lodged. I'll see about it, when I go up. I think he had better not come till after Christmas. My uncle generally has a second piece running, which varies, and I'll get him on in that. We shall then be in working order.'

'All right, that gives time to prepare his mind, and his clothes. I must be off now, Armytage has got all the Rotherwood party coming over to see us. He's going to give a great tea-fight in the green-room, and let the young ladies peep behind the scenes. Will Mr. and Mrs. Lambourne join us? I think Mrs. Lambourne spoke of wishing to meet Miss Merri-field.'

'I'll tell them,' said Clarence. Then he paused and said, in a different tone, 'They kindly insist on carrying me off with them as soon as Randall's operation is over. Alaric is very anxious about that. The Planet reopens on the 1st of December. The fate of our first piece means a great deal for me, as well as for my uncle. I shall hope—Sir Lewis—to let you know if it is successful.'

The use of the title, the form of the sentence, and the modulation of the speaker's expressive voice, showed how much was meant.

'I hope you'll have a first-rate report to give of it,' Lewis said hurriedly; 'we shall look out, of course, for the first notices. But I mustn't tire you. Thanks much for all your help. Lambourne frightened us all considerably about you on Wednesday; but I'm glad it was a false alarm.'

'I was too bad for twenty-four hours to tell him I wasn't exactly going to send in my checks this time,' said Clarence smiling. 'He is given to worry himself overmuch. He has gone to see poor Randall this
morning before the rehearsal. I hope he'll find him going on properly.'

If Alaric's sympathies were too keen for his own comfort, they drew his friends very close to him. The haggard, gaunt-eyed lad looked up at him as he sat by the hospital bed, and after making confidences as to a certain 'she,' who had been more an object of dread to the disgraced youth than any irate landowner, said, in his soft melancholy northern voice—

'I've wished, many a time, Mr. Lambourne, to tell you what I was doing.'

'Tell me now,' said Alaric.

'I felt I was bound to stand by the others, and protest against tyranny; but I saw, sir, that you couldn't join us, so we said nought about it beforehand. We knew you'd understand our position.'

'But, Randall, you had no right to destroy other people's property, and you were great fools into the bargain.'

'Ay, sir, we were grand fools to think the old squire'd heed,' said Randall with an odd smile. 'But now, Mr. Lambourne, d'ye think now he was in the right to lock it up?'

'I can't think otherwise than as I did before,' said Alaric. 'I think it is not kind of him. But he has the right, and, certainly, you won't have led him to alter his point of view. I have been very unhappy in thinking that I may have led you to think I could justify violence, even if you were hardly treated. But what brought you here?'

'Terry, the carpenter here, came from Coalham. I'd heard of him there. He doesn't know me, but he knew a Yorkshire lad would do a day's work, and he got me a berth; and when I saw Mr. Burnet I thought
of how you told us of his acting at the club, and his voice had a turn of the young minister's at the old church; and he always spoke handsome and like a friend.'

'But why didn't you come to me instead of running away at all? Didn't you trust me?'

'Nay, sir; but we weren't going to involve you in our troubles, and so I told Furlonger. He'd have asked you to beg us off. But I said you were our friend, and Manningham's too, and you'd been torn in half between us. And I was ashamed of a fool's trick.'

'Thank you; but I'd rather have been involved than had so much anxiety about you—since I was your friend.'

'Ay, sir; I see that now. And I'm right glad to see you. And, if I don't get over to-morrow, never you blame yourself, sir, for aught; for I'd have been a regular bad one by now, but for the club and you showing us matters in a new light. And I'd be glad if you'd tell Sir James, I'd be willing, if I live, and get to work again, to pay my share to getting the gate mended. For I've had time to consider what you've said that people aren't always responsible for having limited views. And, maybe, he'll have learned a lesson too.'

Alaric did not feel as if his convert would exactly satisfy the views of Sir James Manningham, or that that gentleman would quite like to be made allowance for. But it was something in a suspicious world that the views had been expressed so freely and more, perhaps, that the two parted after Alaric had told of his more recent anxiety, and its cessation, with a hand-clasp of real affection on both sides. None of the south country village and town lads who followed
Alaric could, as Randall might perhaps have expressed it, have done him so much justice, and he found once more that it was difficult to turn his mind to the representation of Orlando. But he was keenly interested in Juliet, and went now to meet her at the theatre, and go through his scenes with her. They grew friendly over what he called his blunders, and he told her how much he had stood in awe of 'Uncle Dick,' and how much his approval had once meant for him.

'He was very kind the other night,' said Juliet shyly.

'Yes,' said Alaric; 'let me give you a bit of advice. May I? You're contemplating a very serious step. You don't know the pluck and the strength and the luck you would need to carry it out. Go home, now, and think it all over, and if, after a little while, you feel that you must take it, write to my wife or to me, and I will talk it over with my uncle, and ask him for some definite advice for you. He can't attend to anything till his theatre is started. You will see how things fall out by that time, and how your idea looks to you and to your friends. We shall go home, I hope, on Wednesday. We want Clarence to have as much rest as possible, before he begins the rehearsals. You know he is a very dear brother to us both. I am very glad to have made acquaintance with all of you, and we hope, perhaps, some time we shall persuade you to come and see us.'

As Alaric spoke in his clear soft voice, Juliet felt that her heart grew lighter. He had disconnected her stage prospects skilfully from Clarence, and at the same time made it impossible for her to do anything to carry them out at present, which was exactly what he had intended. He meant to give every one time to breathe.
CHAPTER XXXIII

THE ADRIATIC IS FREE

Juliet had begged off from the tea party in the green-room, on the plea of resting before the evening. Agnes was unusually ready for the diversion, and Miss Anne, in a new hat, of a most becoming shape, was bustling about, and helping in all the arrangements for it. Nothing had been said; but first the Major's air of suppressed rapture, and then Aunt Nance's bloom and cheeriness slowly became apparent to their unsuspecting juniors. The air was ripe for a discovery, and as Juliet now walked rather languidly back from the theatre, she beheld a bunch of autumn violets adorning her aunt's plush jacket, and was informed by Agnes, with open eyes and bated breath, that the Major had stuck them in as Aunt Nance opened the gate to him.

Juliet sank into a chair.

'O Nestie! How shocking! Poor Aunt Minnie!' she exclaimed. 'Oh——,' and she laughed nervously, 'if this is the result of travelling companies. No wonder people think them dangerous.'

'Well,' said Agnes, 'I don't believe it would ever have happened at home. But there, Jetty, don't say a word. Can it be—Irish gallantry?'

'No, no. I see it plain. Aunt Anne, who came
to look after us all! Well, one thing. No one now can say anything to anybody!'

Miss Anne, unconscious of how she was watched by her nieces' 'eyes of youth,' presently came in and proposed that Agnes should go with her to the station to meet the Rotherwood party. Ernley Armytage had asked for some one to accompany him, and accordingly, early in the afternoon, they met the train from Clarebridge, and greeted Lord Rotherwood, young Mohun, three lively-looking girls, and Miss Merrifield, the latter wondering how to make her communication to Agnes.

Ere long they were walking together down the little hill leading from the station, while the others went on in front, in a merry group, and after all her deliberations, Bessie, doubting whether she should have another opportunity, dashed into the subject.

'There's a letter from Ceylon at last!'

'Oh!'—a very uninforming O, worthy to be a nought.

'And we are all surprised. Harry refuses the living. He wants to do Mission work.'

'That is better,' said Agnes.

'And what surprises us more, he is engaged to a young lady whom he met going out to the Zenana Mission.' And Elizabeth longed but feared to look under her companion's broad hat, even when she heard, 'Oh, I am so glad.'

Yes, it was really a tone of relief, and then Agnes repeated, 'I am so glad—it quite takes a weight off my mind. I was so much afraid that I had spoilt his life. Yes, it sounds conceited, but, indeed, I was.'

'Oh, I understand. I was going to say, too, I am so glad,' said Bessie, giving her hand a little private squeeze; 'but indeed I am, to believe it is not a great blow to you.'
'No,' said Agnes; 'it is, really and truly, the greatest possible relief every way.'
'I am more than half ashamed of him, too,' said Bessie.
'No, no; don't be that. He has found some one much worthier and nobler, who has found her real Christian career, and this is choosing the highest.'
'That is true; but one likes constancy.'
'Well, yes, in the main; but it would have been horrid. I mean,' said Agnes, catching herself up with a little laugh, 'I did so dread his coming home. Yes, I know I am going to Beechcroft, but don't you see, I felt, after his illness and all, and the way we treated him, as if it was in a manner due to him to see if—if—'
'If you could bring yourself to care for the boy,' said Bessie.
'Not exactly,' said Agnes, even blushing more deeply than before; 'it does not sound nice. But after being in such a whirl I could not be sure that I had given him a fair hearing, when he meant to be so good and generous.'
'I understand.'
'And now—oh, wait a moment before we go in. Cannot I be released from this going to Beechcroft?'
Bessie laughed. 'Well, you see you were always to go there as my friend, weren't you? The other points both on their side and yours were not expressed, only understood, and I know my aunt and Mrs. Mohun still really wish to see you there. It would be more awkward not to go than to go—'
'Perhaps. And, oh! it is something to know that you still own me as a friend.'
'More than ever,' said Bessie fervently, venturing
to kiss her in the empty entrance, unseen, as she thought; but Ernley Armytage did see from the stair, where he had gone to fetch a key, and the sight made him the more sure that his doom was sealed—but it was not quite the gloom of despair, for perhaps another light was before him. Romeo's change as to Rosaline had not been studied in vain as to 'a virulent constancy.'

He showed them into the green-room, which seemed to be all one scene of merriment. Dolph had just brought in some muffins, and Lord Rotherwood accosted him with, 'Ha, Teague! I thought I saw you expire at your lady's feet. Or have you re-suscitated as Flibbertigibbet?'

'Yes, true, my Lord, I've many lives in one,' responded Dolph, perfectly respectfully, but with such readiness of blank verse, that Lord Rotherwood was enchanted.

'You have a gem there,' he said to Selva, 'if he only was your slave; I should make an offer for him. Ah! Phyllis looks at me, she knows what her mother would say, and our demure old housekeeper. For actually the servants could hardly get their work done, he amused them all so much.'

'Might it not be like the man who bought Punch for his private amusement, papa?' suggested his daughter.

'I'm afraid we shall not keep him long,' said Selva. 'There seem openings for him in London.'

'Oh!' cried Gillian expressively.

'Mr. Belville and Mr. Burnet will look after him there,' added Agnes.

'He is really one of the best boys in the world,' said Selva. 'You can't think what he has been to
that poor property-man who, by the bye—ah! what is it? Did he run away from Mr. Lambourne, or from your brother, Miss Merrifield?'

'I thought I heard something about his being a poacher,' said Ernley.

'A property-man,' asked Mysie, 'is that the same as a poacher?' And as every one began laughing, 'Well, I thought it might be so in Ireland, because Lady Willingham said it.'

'Oh, Selva, Selva!' was the cry from one set, and 'Mysie, always putting your foot in it,' from the other.

'Well, I'm not ashamed of my native land, only unluckily we haven't any property to poach.'

'Property-men and poachers seem to me equally out of my brother David's line,' added Bessie.

At that moment the door opened and Markham ushered in Mr. Merrifield.

Up jumped Bessie with 'David, David! how came you here?'

'The same to you, Bessie! Mr. Burnet sent me to find Mr. Lambourne.'

'You are come to see poor Randall,' said Alaric, advancing with outstretched hand, and Lord Rotherwood was giving a hearty greeting, adding, 'The coup seems worthy of the place! Do you know Lady Willingham?' and he named the others, David exclaiming, 'One I know already,' as he clasped Agnes's hand. But the general bewilderment was indescribable, since all the Willingham party except Agnes believed him to be their former visitor, strangely transformed as a conquering hero; Bessie was extremely puzzled at his arrival, and wondered whether he were aware of Harry's refusal, while she doubted whether Agnes's
relief were not connected with Mr. Armytage, and on his side, David thought the brightness no one could help detecting on Agnes's brow, due to all being made smooth for his cousin!

There was a certain relief in the spirits of Gillian and Mysie, who danced round him, declaring, 'Davie come to see the play! Oh! what fun! what fun.'

'Indeed, I did not come with any such pleasant purpose,' said David. 'I came to bring a poor old parishioner to see her sick son.'

'Here!' exclaimed Bessie, but this was explained. He had been to Mr. Burnet, who had sent him under Markham's pilotage to find Mr. Lambourne, while old Mrs. Randall waited at the lodging. So while Selva administered a cup of tea, he arrived at some comprehension of the mode in which this remarkable company had been gathered together in such a place. 'Just like the game of consequences,' as the girls agreed. 'David and Celia in the green-room of a theatre eating buttered sallylunns, consequence was——'

'Consequence will be,' broke in Miss Dorset, 'nobody will be dressed in time.'

'And we haven't seen how the scenes come down yet,' exclaimed Gillian.

'Oh! I'll show you at once,' said Ernley.

'I must run home,' said Selva, 'if you'll excuse me; I must speak to nurse! Take care of them, Agnes.'

'And,' anxiously asked David, 'about this poor woman. Can she see her son to-night?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell,' said Alaric; 'I would go with you, but Orlando comes on at once, and I'm wanted.'
'Let me go,' said Lord Rotherwood; 'I can't flatter myself that I am wanted. Oh yes, I know the way. They bring me here to take the chair whenever the Board of Governors have a special bear-fight. Come, and then come back to dine with us.'

'Oh! but, father, you'll not make us miss the beginning with Orlando and Adam,' entreated Lady Phyllis, as if her father had never seen 'As You Like It' in his life.

'No, my dear, I'm not going to smooth—or soothe—which is it?—his pillow, only to get the poor woman in.'

Which he did, picking her up in a cab to save time, and using his powers as chairman with house-surgeon and matron, as Alaric could not have done out of his own county. It was as he and David walked back together in the gaslight that he asked, 'Well, what do you say to this decision of your late curate?'

'Oh! has he answered? He takes Beechcroft, of course?'

'So you have not heard? Some people say he does not know which side his bread is buttered; but perhaps there are better things than butter, even if it be ghee.'

The Marquis had got so far when Major O'Connor overtook them, and after shaking hands with Lord Rotherwood, said, in the paternal tone of a future uncle-in-law, 'Mr. Merrifield? I congratulate you. I never saw a sweeter little place, nor a snugger.'

'Premature, Major,' observed Lord Rotherwood. 'This is Mr. David Merrifield.'

'What! He ain't himself? Not the lad who made himself a regular study on the lawn after poor Agnes, and she's been looking white about ever since?
What was Anne telling me then?' he muttered to himself.

'Come, I hope not; I should not have said the young lady did look anything but charming,' said Lord Rotherwood; 'for, to tell the whole truth, that young gentleman hath purveyed himself a lady doctress wife as well as a mission to the Katherins—Kathleens—Karens, I mean, up in Burmah, and refuseth utterly the calm groves of Beechcroft.'

To which the Major's reply was, 'The young dog, I should like to lick him!'

'You hardly respond to that sentiment, I imagine,' said his Lordship, laughing.

David gave a start at these words, then collecting himself, responded, 'Hardly, considering that he was unequivocally dismissed, and took it much to heart.'

'That's what you young fellows are made of!' exclaimed the Major contemptuously. 'As if a girl was worth having who would come down at the first whistle. Well, poor Armytage deserves her, and I hope he'll get her now.'

With which sentiment the Major passed on, while the Marquis observed, 'I hope there's no reason for thinking the young lady used him ill. She has a sweet face.'

'No reason at all,' said David emphatically. 'He went about it in a hot-headed boyish way, came back to me in a transport of despair, had an illness, and certainly took his rejection as final.'

'Ay, ay, worked it off in that way. There's no knowing who will get over those affairs and who won't. And I must say I have a respect for a man who goes after severe work among savagery instead of sitting
down at ease in a place that has been under model rule for generations past.'

'I knew it would make a man of him,' said David.

'And too much of a man for a few hundred of poor old Will Mohun's tenants who can't have a sore throat but they call it brown-titus, and send up to the Court for arrowroot, "for mother can't make use of gruel nohow." You don't see much like that, eh?'

'Not quite. It is a capital thing for Harry, he's of the right sort of stuff, and how could he help it.'

So David was not out of spirits, in spite of the Major's description of Agnes, and he succeeded, in the after-dinner walk to the theatre, in exchanging with Bessie a few words. 'Does she know?'

'Oh yes, and rejoices, really and heartily. It is a burthen off her mind.'

And certainly Celia had never before been half so animated, nor sustained her part so well! and never had the 'Wills o' the Wisp' had more appreciative spectators than Lady Phyllis, and Gillian and Mysie Merrifield.

As for David, he gazed at Celia and said nothing. While Celia tried by strong effort utterly to disbelieve that he could be there.

But David, as he wished his sister good-night, said, with a long breath of relief—

'That's the way the thing should be done.'

Which might not have been the opinion of those who looked on Celia as an actress and not as a woman!
CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HEART OF THE SPINDLEWOOD

There was a meeting of Lady Phyllis Devereux's Essay Society, to which she carried off her two young cousins to sleep two nights at Rotherwood. Bessie Merrifield was the less sorry, as Agnes looked very weary, and that first evening was very quiet and silent, in some degree from shyness and the sense of an embarrassing position, but also, because, as Mrs. Mohun said, 'That poor girl looks quite worn out! You will take care of her, Bessie.'

The which Bessie was most anxious to do, and the next day, after breakfast, established her as her own guest in the old schoolroom, where she had been desired to consider herself at home with her proofs, letters, and MSS. She had work to do, and settled Agnes on the comfortable old faded couch, with a choice of books and magazines.

The room had been haunted by two generations of children, and showed their remnants in books, pictures, and curiosities, telling of past pursuits and enthusiasms of the birds of last year's nest, with somewhat of present parish stores. Still it was pretty, and thoroughly comfortable, the curtains faded to an aesthetic tint, the chairs, bona-fide children's chairs some of them, others deep comfortable ones, too old.
for the drawing-room. The fire was bright and cheery, and the window was open, for St. Martin's summer made bright sunshine on the chrysanthemums, fuchsias, and African marigolds which lingered in the flower-beds, surrounded by grass and silver sparkles of late-lying dew, gradually vanishing. The trees were all one glow—horse-chestnuts rich apricot colour, elms spangled, but letting their yellow leaves float slowly down in a golden rain through the windless air, the wood of oaks above a study of brown and old gold, a cherry-tree supplying a vivid bit of crimson in the midst, and there was not a sound except the song of a robin near at hand, a woodpecker's tap at intervals, the conversation of some rooks, and now and then a sheep-bell.

Bessie was correcting proofs, and worked on in silence, till at last she looked round and met Agnes's eyes with a sigh and slight smile of satisfaction in them according with the attitude, all repose, but with her own grace.

'No, I'm not asleep,' she said; 'I'm only enjoying this perfect rest!'

'You poor tired thing!'

'It is not being tired, but if you could only guess at the comfort of the rest in every way———'

'Not having a part on your mind.'

'Oh! yes, a part of which I knew myself to be incapable, and sure to disappoint and vex, and be only a drag, in spite of all the teaching!'

'Worrying and being worried.'

'Oh, don't say that. It was my own stupidity, you know; but there was the doubt about its being right. Now I should not mind even if they do go on with it! And then to have the other matter off my
mind. Oh! with another sigh of relief, 'my heart has not felt so light since I was at Coalham.'

Still it was the sort of happiness which results in repose, and Bessie felt that the kindest course was thus to let her rest, wondering all the time how soon a new agitation and need of decision might be before her. David had been pressed to join the party as soon as his presence at Clarebridge was known, and he had replied that he should be glad to come from Thursday till Saturday, as by that time it would be known whether Mrs. Randall could go home. On the other hand, Mr. Armytage was to come on that same day, since his parts were concluded on the Wednesday evening. How would it be?

Meantime, after her long morning's rest, Agnes revived enough much to enjoy what Lady Merrifield called pottering with the two old ladies, visiting the garden and farm-yard, feeding the old pony in the paddock, and hearing all manner of fond reminiscences, which all gave a sense of peace and continuity; and she listened with a sympathy which gave great pleasure, so that Lady Merrifield could not but sigh a little at having lost such a daughter.

'How strange it is,' said she to her sister-in-law, 'when we were young, to settle into this dear old place would have seemed an ideal for the young clergyman and his wife. Now we see the heights beyond.'

'Well, we in the valley wish some of these young men would condescend to us,' returned Mrs. Mohun. 'William wants more of a companion than good old Mr. Rice can be, and it would be so good for the boys to have a real influence! I can't help hoping we may attract your nephew when he sees the place; if, as we suspected, he refused it for Harry's sake.'
'And you have baited your trap with that pretty creature! For I came to the conclusion, when I was nursing Harry, that David was equally smitten, only being older, and a most generous person, he carried it off better.'

'I am sure he ought to be rewarded and finish the novel.'

'The tale rather—it is too good for a novel.'

'But how about poor Mr. Rice? For David must not be able to keep a curate!'

'William thinks he can get him the workhouse chaplaincy, which is just what he is fit for. The fear is that she cares for that big sailor, Will's friend, who so faithfully goes about with them.'

'I remember! Harry heard that she was engaged to him! But nothing seems to have come of it.'

'We shall see, for Will insisted on our having him here, as soon as his acting was over, and he is coming with David Merrifield to-morrow. You know Phyllis is coming with her indispensable Mysie!'

The two parties from Clarebridge and from Rotherwood arrived nearly at the same time the next day. Ernley Armytage made his appearance with a basket containing some delicate lilac autumn crocuses, which the botanically-minded Gillian had, in coming down, espied from the train, and longed for, and they were set off with some sprays of the beautiful pink berries of the spindlewood. Neither of them grew so as to lend itself readily to a bouquet, but he had managed to arrange them with great taste, and Gillian was charmed into a glow of pleasure.

'Spindlewood,' said her cousin Will mischievously; 'how do you like the augury, Gill?'

Gillian lifted her great dark eyes in reproof at the
audacious jest; but Mysie, examining the berries in all simplicity, exclaimed, 'Oh! here's his little bleeding heart!'

'There!' cried Will, and burst out laughing; nor could Bessie and Phyllis help joining him at the comical bewildered look of Mysie, and the resentful dignity of Gillian.

'I never heard such nonsense,' she said, with emphasis, but with crimson cheeks.

'I beg your pardon,' cried Ernley, 'I never meant it—at least I did,' he stammered, while Will laughed the more, and Bessie was charmed to exchange a responsive smile with Agnes.

'So you have not brought the Major,' said General Mohun, who had just come in.

'No, he is better employed,' and Ernley looked at Agnes and laughed.

'Has anything———' she began, then stopped herself in haste, and blushed.

'Oh no,' replied Ernley, 'not a word; but nothing can be more visible to the naked eye. Your brother believes that the public declaration is reserved for the return to Miss Dorset.'

'That is quite right,' said Agnes calmly; 'she is the only person who has any real concern with Aunt Anne. And how is poor Rigg, or Randall, whichever he is?'

'Going on well, I believe,' said Ernley; 'but Mr. Merrifield knows more about him than I do.'

Mr. Armytage turned to attempt to make his peace with Gillian, leaving David to answer in detail that Randall had gone favourably through the operation, though he was still in a precarious state, but so penitent and grateful that there was every reason to think
that this escapade would be the turning-point of his life.

'Sir James Manningham has consented not to prosecute,—a great relief to Mr. Lambourne, as well as to Randall. One never knows, I should have thought his line injudicious; but I can't but see that the lad is wonderfully developed and softened. Lambourne told him of the pardon exactly as if they had been equals in the same scrape, and asked his opinion as to what he ought to do about his gates now! They parted like brothers, and, while the old mother went through the suspense, with true north-country endurance, Lambourne seemed hardly able to get through it, and was quite knocked up afterwards with nervous headache. They did not get off till this morning, so he went with an easier mind.'

Agnes, really anxious for intelligence, and willing to draw attention away from the confused young girl, asked Ernley whether anything had been heard of George Buckley.

'Why, yes, at last. Burnet had a letter yesterday from a man he asked to look out for him, and he has got taken on to fill a gap at the Duchess Theatre. Wasn't a success at all. Also Lewis had a letter from his father, who had heard from the scamp himself to the same effect. Old Buckley at present means to play the Roman father, and leave George to reap as he has sown. Besides, he's pinned fast just now by the business. For once, a strike is an ill wind that has blown good. Those asses who struck at Avonmouth seem to have brought you down a fleet to Ousehaven, and old Buckley can't stir till Lewis comes home, which is lucky.'

People were moving to go up to dress by this time,
but David and his sister were the first to meet by the hall fire on coming down.

'Mr. Mohun has intentions,' said Bessie.
'I suppose so,' said David, in a very stolid, unconvinced voice.

Bessie next observed, 'Well,' and he responded the like.

Then she added, 'I don't in the least believe in the hero of Egypt.'
'Eh?'
'He is a sailor, you know.'
'Well, I did think he made a prodigious point of that spindlewood stuff for Gill. But that's only one side of the matter.'
'I am quite clear as to the other damsel.'
'Eh?' again said David, with a sound of suspense.
'Old playfellow terms,' she said, 'no more. She has her hero, and I am not going to say who that is, except that it never was poor Harry.'
'Bessie!' and with a long breath he bent down and kissed her forehead.

David was invisible to the younger part of the family after dinner, being captured by Mr. Mohun, every one knew why, but his absence was not regretted in the game of 'Wretched Outlines,' namely, casual blots and scratches of ink, handed round to be developed and explained, when Gillian, having commemorated Flibbertigibbet and the porter, was amazed at the production of a hugh spindlewood berry with a great heart in the midst! Who drew it? No one would own to it. Certainly not Mr. Armytage, for he had made two black strokes into a neat little boat, with rigging complete.

Was it an augury? For at breakfast, Mr. Mohun
handed him a long blue official letter, posted on from home, whence he proclaimed at once, with great exultation, his appointment to the gunboat *Capsicum*.

‘How I should hate it, after real war,’ said Gillian.

‘Some day I shall put into Rockquay,’ he returned.

‘Then perhaps Lady Merrifield will bring you to see how you like it.’

And he was found slyly abstracting from the scrap-basket both the large-hearted spindlewood and the Flibbertigibbet design in the midst of the final bustle which sent him off to the Admiralty instead of the pheasants. Gillian turned to Bessie—

‘There!’ she said, with an odd sort of sigh. ‘And you are going to write, you tiresome old Mesa!’

Bessie held up a bundle of proofs, and told the girls that she could give them the previous ones of her present story to read ‘if they would be good.’ Moreover, the gentlemen were going out shooting, and they were to take them luncheon at the hanging wood of beech-trees, where it was always dry and sheltered.

‘And won’t you come, Bessie?’

‘Thank you. I hate gunnery a great deal too much.’

‘And Miss Willingham?’ politeness compelled Gillian to say.

‘Miss Willingham is resting. She is too much tired to go galloping about with you before luncheon.’

It was clearly a relief, and the young ladies, with much merriment, sped the sportsmen on their way, while Bessie conducted Agnes once more to her private domain; but it was not long before the door opened to admit David.

‘They told me I should find you here,’ he said to his sister.
Agnes wondered how best to leave them to themselves, guessing that there was an important consultation in view, and so, indeed, there was; but at the first attempt to move, David turned round and said, 'No, don't go; I want to hear what you think about this matter. Yes; quite as much as what Bessie says.'

'This living!' exclaimed Bessie.

'Oh, but——!' cried Agnes, stopping short, though there were volumes of meaning in that but, and David looked round on her with a smile.

'Is it still in suspense?' asked Bessie.

'Not as far as I could prevent it,' said David. 'I said I had work I could not leave, and that I was far too young a man to feel justified in sitting down in so delightful a retirement; but I cannot persuade this good Squire to take my answer as final. He sets Uncle Jasper upon me to represent that the country does not deserve to be neglected, and really, in some points of view, needs a man of good old blood and breeding more than even the town.'

'That is true,' said Bessie. 'Squires are critical, and village poor know a gentleman when they see him. Mr. Richard Burnet is popular enough at Coalham; but I can see how the old women here, or at home, would shake their heads at him.'

'Oh yes; nothing can be more true. There are complications with the various grades of rural life that need people to the manner born, but still that does not seem to me to justify me in sitting down at my age to a model squire and squiress, and about five hundred feudal retainers. What did that old Caliph say about Damascus, "Paradise is not for this life." What do you say, Miss Willingham?'

He need not have asked. Her face had lighted up
with the delight of heartfelt admiration and sympathy.

'Oh, I am glad,' she murmured.

He came and sat down beside her. Bessie murmured something about 'post,' and fled.

'You are glad,' said David. 'You feel that it is not time to retire from the brunt of the battle.'

'Oh no; I knew you could not,' and the sweet blue eyes were raised with a responsive look, such as would have been worth anything in Celia.

'You feel so—you would feel so—even if it concerned yourself as well as me. Agnes, I am saying it very stupidly, but—but we feel together on this point. Would you work with me, and be my blessing in my own appointed place?'

Agnes gave one startled look of inquiry, then cast down her eyes, with a crimson colour rushing over her face, and let her hand be grasped.

'You will? You know what it is to work there, but you do not know how I would do my very best to—to show how I love you—how I have loved you from the first.'

'Oh, in spite of all—this?' she murmured.

'The more for your brave unselfishness, and crossing your own will.'

'But won't it do you harm among your people?'

'Can't you forget poor Harry's nonsense. You see how Bessie loves you. And, as to the Squire and Co., they will be bitterly disappointed not to have you! I believe you were half the charm.'

'Hush, please. This is a dear restful place; but, indeed, I had rather be at work with you—you, in your classes and factories and all. How I have longed, after feeling that it was the Master's work that I was
set to! And, oh!'—as he looked at her with a shy rapture in his eyes, yet still a yearning that seemed to win more from her—'to think of belonging to you! You will make me more worthy!'

What would David have said to this cannot be known, for a whirlwind burst on them from the door. 'Bessie, Miss Willingham, we are just setting off. Won't you—— O—oh!'

And Mysie shut the door on them, and made an astonished face. 'David's there. And I do believe——'

'Nonsense,' said Gillian; 'they are both much too sensible!'
CHAPTER XXXV
THE ORCHARD WALLS ARE HIGH AND HARD TO CLIMB

DURING Agnes's
winding up their
'

each other with,
'

Poor

visit,

had been
and they met

Selva

That's done/ on either side.

little Selva,
'

and

Lewis

affairs at Clarebridge,

how

tired she looks

'

exclaimed

!

'

wonder which had the worst of it
Whoever did not end with what Rupert calls a
and I am happy to say
negative quantity/ said Selva
Lewis.

I

!

'

'

;

that I have threepence halfpenny to the good, out of
what you gave me for housekeeping.
Oh how that
!

Mrs. Kebekah did hope to find no end of
Oh yes,
breakages by that there limb of a boy
Quakeress as she is, she was profane enough for that

excellent

!

!

I believe her real desire

broken to be able to

And

insist

was to find enough plates
on our buying a new dinner

when nothing turned out to
have been broken except one tumbler, into which Aunt
Nan poured boiling water one day when she saw the

set

!

to see her face,

Major coming, and was trying to look indifferent, and
that of course was replaced.
But I say, Lewis, if we
in
let
it
the
van
be
"No more Quaking
go on,
yellow
!

Cottages for
'

We

me

'
!

are not very likely to go on at all except for

free gratis for nothing at all/ said Lewis.
sport
'
What ? It hasn't answered ?
'


'Thanks to the Raynham and Rotherwood business, we clear it by—what do you think? Just six pounds seven and elevenpence-halfpenny.'

'Not exactly enough to keep Rupert at Oxford,' said Selva laughing; 'but he has got a scholarship, that does not so much matter! And if the shipping business is reviving, we shall do.'

'Ay, the cobbler must stick to his last,' said Lewis sighing.

'And I shan't be hunted away from my bonny boy!' said Selva, as that youth began pulling down her hair. 'So after all, what has come of it has just been Aunt Nan and the Major, who are out spooning somewhere now, though I thought she would have helped me to encounter the dragon of the Quaking Cottage.'

'If that was the worst of it?' said Lewis grimly.

'Oh, never mind! It will be sure to go off.'

'I'm not so sure of that. She is a wilful little mortal, just as likely as not to take the bit between her teeth. And then I thought at least poor Armytage would get the better of Agnes's tomfoolery!'

'However, he is disposed of, if that was an appointment.'

'Hold hard! Who is this coming up to the gate with Agnes? Has she gone and picked up another parson?'

'Oh, that is only Mr. Merrifield—the man who belongs to Rigg!' said Selva.

Selva's 'only' turned out to be misplaced when Agnes, in the little upstairs room, confided her perfect happiness in the honour that had been done to her, and her dread of not being worthy.

'So that was at the bottom of it all!' said Selva. 'That was why you were so set against both the other
poor young men! Dear me, I'm afraid Lewis won't like it!'

'Not at first, but he will in time. Selva, dear, you'll help me.'

'I'll do anything to see you look as you did when you came in,' said Selva, kissing her. 'Just another creature from the doleful-faced thing you've been all along.'

'Oh, I hope I haven't been so horrid!'

'Not horrid, my darling, only you went in for tragedy instead of comedy, with that grave oval face of yours,' and Selva endeavoured an imitation, over which they were both laughing heartily, when invaded by Juliet not at all surprised but sympathising.

Lewis was certainly not gratified. He had not been over gracious to David Merrifield, but as he said, his sister must please herself, and women were past him.

'And you made such a prudent marriage yourself,' observed Selva demurely.

'Didn't I? Where's the other woman who would have saved threepence halfpenny out of the Quaking Cottage!?' replied Lewis, while David and Agnes were exchanging a hurried farewell at the front door, leaving further matters to be arranged when father and Aunt Marian had been informed. And as they parted, the Major and Miss Anne arrived at the gate and opened their eyes.

'What will Marian say?'

It was in every one's mind as the party travelled homeward—some with a sense of failure, others half-exulting, half-anxious. When they arrived at the Wharf House there was an outpour, but of unspoken trivialities, and welcomes expended on little Lewis,
with boasts of his newest achievements in the direction of teeth, words, and steps.

It was not till the two aunts were in those rooms of their own which opened into each other that Miss Dorset put her hand on her sister's shoulder, and said, 'What is it, my Nancy?' Then, as Anne threw herself on her breast, hid her face and cried, 'Is it the Major?

'O Minnie, isn't it too bad of me! Can you spare me?'

'I can do anything that is for your happiness, my dear little sister.'

For so Anne still was to Marian.

'But how, after all these years, did he come to think of it?' went on Miss Dorset.

'We saw so much more of one another, and I came to know how good and dear and unselfish he is,' said Anne; 'and he has had such a sad solitary life! I should like to make it nice for him if—if only you, Minnie——'

'Nonsense. Don't you see what a relief it is to me to have you off my mind, you silly girl, and not expect to leave you lonely. Besides, you are not going out of reach, I suppose?'

'Oh, no, no!'

'And I suppose the children will all stay on with me, so I shall not be lonely. Eh—have you all been getting into mischief?'

'O Minnie, you have a great deal more to hear!'

'Come, you may as well prepare me. It is no such good luck as poor Ernley, I fear; not that young curate, surely——'

'Not that. He is disposed of to a female doctor; but his cousin, not a curate I believe, but not much
better off, though a really good, sensible-looking man, rather noted, and sure to get on. And Agnes, poor child, is quite a different creature.'

'I hope she behaved well to Ernley.'

'Quite. No one can accuse her of encouraging him. And we think that—dear Bryan—the Major, I mean, is sure he sees his way to being consoled. So you must be as kind to Agnes as you are to me, dear Marian, and help her with Lewis.'

*So Aunt Marian was being still kept in blissful ignorance of the other mine that was to be sprung upon her; and indeed her kind heart could not help welcoming the bright joyous looks of the two. Agnes had not worn so blithe an air since her father's death, and as to Anne, it was most amusing and half-provoking to see her and 'dear Bryan,' whose affection was so much more demonstrative than that of young lovers, and hers, though shyer, quite as absorbing, so that it was decided that, if they were to return to the category of rational beings they had better be married after Christmas, as soon as a house could be got ready for them.

Lewis had his mauvais quart d'heure with Mr. Buckley, and a still worse one with the mother. It was not pleasant to be considered as the corrupter of innocence, and the poor lady was only slightly moved towards forgiveness by Selva, who, with tears of contrition, declared the loss of George to be her own fault for insisting on keeping her child with her, and making him sleep in lodgings. She mentioned how Lewis had protested, and described his vain endeavours and severe sufferings. There might be considerable exaggeration, but good little Selva believed herself to be speaking the simple truth, and softened the mother
considerably, pointing out that Mr. Burnet had discovered him, and thus prevented the scandal of an attempt to find him through the police; a proceeding from which their feelings had shrunk, and which Lewis felt would have embittered matters. Mr. Buckley could not well quarrel with him, when they were working and consulting together all day, for though the bank affairs were wound up, the shipping agency was reviving. The strike at the rival harbour was indeed over, but there were conveniences at Ousehaven which the ship-owners had discovered, and were not disposed to quit, so that the men who had been dismissed were constantly coming in to beg for employment, and each case required private judgment and consultation. So the stern punctilious 'Sir Lewis' began to melt into the friendly Willingham, or even the Lewis of his boyhood, and though the father's heart was sore, Lewis found himself viewed as sympathiser, not as betrayer. Nobody took much heed of Juliet, in all this rush of events. Nobody talked much of Clarebridge or of Clarence Burnet, and the only news that came of him was a chance mention in a letter from Alaric to David about arrangements for Randall, saying that his cousin had gone back to London, being imperatively needed there, though he was still lame, and by no means as strong yet as could be wished.

Juliet did not talk about her theatrical experiences any more than did the rest, instead, she thought about them. She went on with the exercises that Clarence had suggested to her; she studied various famous parts, and she read sundry books, also brought to her notice by Clarence. It was surprising how much they had contrived to talk about, and Juliet, who had never
read anything of her own accord but plays and a few novels, began to feel her mind grow; she also taught Dolph French, and lent him books to read; Mr. Burnet, he said, had told him to attend to his general education. And she made up her mind as to her own intentions, and all the time, while she exercised her voice, read Browning, and corrected Dolph's accent, she wondered if Clarence was strong again, if the rehearsals were going on well, if—life seemed one great 'if' to her just then.

As time went on her gravity and the absence of her exuberant chatter began to strike Miss Dorset, and, one cold foggy afternoon towards the end of November, finding herself alone with the girl in the gathering dusk, she said—

'Jetty, my dear, I have hardly heard anything about your experiences in Clarebridge.'

'No, Aunt Minnie, I don't think you have,' said Juliet starting a little.

'Did you find that the charm of the thing lasted? Did you enjoy your success?'

'I was very glad to find that I was likely to succeed,' said Juliet.

'I'm afraid you find coming home a little flat. For you see, my dear, it was a sort of thing that couldn't last. Even without all that has come of it you couldn't have kept it up.'

'I never thought it would last long, Aunt Minnie.'

'And so, Jetty, I hope you'll be able to settle down when all the excitement is over. After the wedding we must begin again. I should be quite willing if you and Lewis like to get up a little home acting for our amusement, and I hear the Danes have something on hand. You will enjoy helping.'
'Aunt Marian,' said Juliet, 'I may as well tell you now that I have not given up acting, I mean to study for the stage; I know why you dislike it much better than you can tell me. But it's worth the disagreeables. Agnes says it's not "direct work for the church." Perhaps not. But it's my way of adding to anything in the world that's good and beautiful. Mr. Belville has told me that I have enough talent to try, and his notice is an exceptional chance for me. He told me to study for six months, and Mr. and Mrs. Lambourne have promised to advise me how to do it. Mr. Lambourne told me to consider well. I have, and I mean to go in for the study in any case. I shall be very careful, and you mustn't suppose I don't understand the objections.'

Miss Dorset was a cautious person, and she recognised the determination in Juliet's voice. But she was considerably surprised and a little angry.

'You are very independent,' she said. 'These ideas, I daresay, are natural to the professional actors with whom you have been mixing, but you must see that they are unsuitable to you.'

'If you mean Mr. Burnet, Aunt Minnie, I know that he does not wish me to do it. But I've got to do it on my own responsibility.'

'O Juliet,' said her aunt, 'I never thought you would be discontented with home duties, or caught by a life of mere excitement and frivolity. We have done everything to make this a happy home to you.'

'Aunt Minnie,' cried Juliet passionately, 'I never loved home half so much. That is not fair, you do not say that to Agnes! I should be much more frivolous if I stayed here doing nothing particular;
and, as for excitement—well—I've got stuff enough in me to stand it.'

She burst into tears as she spoke. Contending with the home influence was not easy, and besides, she knew well that she was only telling half the truth.

At this moment Selva came in in a whirl, calling her to make haste and get ready, as it was time to come to the Danes's afternoon party. Juliet fled, and her aunt said nothing of what had passed, but when she was once more left alone she thought much.

She had been more impressed by Juliet's public success than it was perhaps worth, and quite believed in her talent. She recognised the accent of a mind made up; but every instinct of her breeding rose up against the thought. Presently there was a step on the stairs, and Dolph, hardly able to conceal his unconventional delight, opened the door saying—

'Please, ma'am, here's Mr. Burnet!'

Miss Dorset collected herself with a start. 'How do you do, Mr. Burnet? My nephew will be in presently. Dolph, we will have lights.'

'I happen to have a free evening, owing to the last arrangements at the theatre,' said Clarence; 'and I thought that I had better come myself to tell Sir Lewis that I have at last seen Buckley. You perhaps know that his engagements came to an end ten days ago.'

'No; his father refused to communicate with him as long as he remained at the theatre.'

'Well, he is out of an engagement now, and altogether out of luck. He has been an utter fool, of course, and has nothing to say for himself. But I promised him to see what his father would say to him.'

'Did he apply to you for help?'

'No; but another poor fellow I know something
of did, and I hit on Buckley by chance. I had not looked him up at the Duchess—I have been very busy—and I did not think he would be particularly glad to see me.'

The lights were brought, and commonplace inquiries were exchanged. Miss Dorset asked after his health, and he replied that he was quite well, though his knee still required a little care; but the lights revealed that he looked worn and anxious. Then he said that he believed he had to offer congratulations in more than one quarter, and said something with a smile of the general break up of the 'Wills o' the Wisp.'

'Yes,' said Miss Dorset, 'and I hope my nephew's natural occupation will once more take up his time. But the scheme has certainly decided Dolph's future, and I understand that you are aware that my younger niece is very unwilling to give up the—the amusement.'

What induced Miss Dorset to say this she hardly knew; perhaps Juliet's statement that he did not approve of the idea, perhaps the fact that people were very apt to ask his opinion.

He flushed crimson, and said hurriedly, 'Yes—yes, I am aware of it.'

'I am so much perplexed by her proposal, and as I understand she has received encouragement from your uncle, Mr. Belville, and has discussed the matter with your cousins, and as you have been so much thrown with them all, I cannot but take this opportunity of asking you in confidence what you think.'

Clarence looked at her for a minute, absolutely unable to speak, and she went on with a sort of diffident, distant courtesy, which he keenly felt.

'You will not, I am sure, take it as a reflection on your profession that the idea is very startling. She is
very enthusiastic, but all her training has been so different——

'You ask me what I think of it,' interrupted Clarence suddenly, starting up and pointing to a picture at her side. 'That is what I think of it—Raphael's St. Margaret. That picture is at Monks' Warren, and I lay there and looked at it. She is like that; that is all she knows about it!'

Miss Dorset in her turn was struck dumb. She was not at all in the habit of comparing Juliet to St. Margaret, nor had she realised that quite such terrible dragons would haunt her chosen path.

'I did not mean to speak till after our first night,' he went on hastily; 'but I cannot honestly discuss this matter and be silent. I can't discuss it except from one point of view—that—that I would give my very heart's blood to protect her from one touch of evil or scandal or vexation—that—that I want to take care of her.'

He could hardly control himself to speak audibly, and Miss Dorset, in spite of her astonishment, took the upper hand.

'Sit down, Mr. Burnet,' she said, 'we must talk this matter over quietly. I must understand how much you mean to imply.'

Clarence sat down, and was silent for a minute, then he began to speak quietly and with a formality far from displeasing to his hearer.

'It was of course impossible that I should declare my feelings when she was of necessity thrown into such constant intercourse with me, and I hope I did not betray them. If so, it was when I was not fully myself. Besides, I know of course what you are likely to think. I have not the slightest wish to slur over my
antecedents. On the contrary, if—if ever I had the right to ask her to consider them, I should take care that she saw exactly the state of the case. As to what I am in myself, you will not judge by anything I say. As for my profession, it is a risky one, but I have been hitherto successful, and I think I may say that I am likely still to succeed, and to win something worth her acceptance. And,' with a sudden faltering of his dignified tone, 'if—if she is set on going on the stage herself, so I could take care of her. Otherwise you know I could not dare to help, and I should injure her by the very slightest approach. She doesn't know that, but I should not dare to help her on. Even my uncle must be careful about it. Not that I would influence her decision as to the profession. Her talents give her every right to try it, and—she should never hear again of my wishes.'

Poor Miss Dorset did not half follow what he said. It was all unfamiliar and uncomfortable to her; but she could not but recognise that whatever combination of circumstances had produced Clarence Burnet had produced a somewhat exceptional person, to whom ordinary rules hardly applied. He had impressed her the first time she saw him. He certainly had said nothing to set her mind at rest as to a theatrical life. She said, with hesitation—

'I am sure that my niece is thinking of nothing but her acting. All the ideas you suggest to me—are—most perplexing. But I gather that you do not advise her go on the stage—in any case?'

'I find it difficult to answer you,' said Clarence. 'It is right to say that I should advise any other young lady with such talents and such an opening to try. I believe her to be capable of the strain of it in every
way, and it is possible greatly to modify the difficulties—in her case. Alaric can help and advise her safely. And, even if I had the right, I would exact no pledge which circumstances might make impossible. In a world where every one is working and earning I could not insist even on my wife resigning a future that might be so splendid. But I would rather do it all for her, and never let her know a risk or a struggle. I want to serve her—"

Steps on the stairs interrupted him.

'I beg of you to be silent,' he said, 'till after next Thursday; and let me go, if you please. Sir Lewis can find me at the station.'

Here Lewis himself burst cheerfully into the room—

'Why, Burnet, this is quite a surprise. What has brought you down? Why, you don't look quite yourself yet!'

Clarence gave his hand, utterly incapable of recollecting what had brought him down, till Miss Dorset mentioned George Buckley, when he roused himself with a start, and began to describe his interview with him in more detail. Lewis proposed that they should go together to the old man, and see what could be done in the matter.

Clarence agreed, but declared that he was obliged to go back to town early, so that returning to dinner was impossible. He nearly crushed Miss Dorset's rings into her fingers; and hardly had he and Lewis gone off together, when Selva and Juliet came in.

'A very dull party,' said Juliet languidly.

'O Miss Juliet,' cried Dolph, who had brought in a letter for Selva, 'who do you think has been here? Mr. Burnet himself!'
Miss Dorset turned her head and looked sideways at Juliet, and in her face read the decrees of fate.

'Where is he? I mean what did he come for?' she said.

'How very odd,' said Selva handing over the note. It was a very polite and pressing invitation from Emily Lambourne, begging Sir Lewis and Lady Willingham to excuse a short notice and come on the ensuing Friday to spend a few days at Monks' Warren, bringing Miss Juliet Willingham with them. Miss Dorset read the note, and gave it back.

'Oh yes, my dear,' she said. 'Go—accept the invitation.'

Then as Selva went away she looked again at Juliet, and in a moment the girl flung herself down, and hid her face on her lap.

'O Aunt Minnie, Aunt Minnie, please be quite sure—I never cared as much for you as I do now!'
CHAPTER XXXVI

‘THOU ART THYSELF’

The result of the interview with old Mr. Buckley was that, on the next day, Lewis went up to London and returned with George, considerably shorn of his beams, very sick of the stage, and actually submitting to be set down in his old corner of the office on the following morning without any complaint. He was rather sullen, and had very little to say; but Lewis opined that he was much ashamed of his folly, and of the straits in which he had been found. Lewis told his wife that Burnet had been thoroughly kind in the matter, and that he had found that it was by no means the first time that he had held out a helping hand to fellow professionals who were down on their luck. Selva agreed that he had been the saving of poor George; but, as is the way of people, they ‘thought it better’ not to dilate on his merits to Juliet.

She, however, in the deepening of feeling that was coming on her, and in the growth of her whole nature, reproached herself for the slight hard fashion in which she had scoffed at poor George’s devotion. She knew that she had added the last intolerable sting, and that a little kindness, a little sense that he was of the same flesh and blood as herself, might have made all the difference.
On the morning after his return, as he was going home to dinner, she met him in the street, and, with a sudden impulse, stopped and held out her hand: 'I'm glad you have come back,' she said. 'You see, most of the "Wills o' the Wisp" are settling down on terra firma.'

This was a kind way of putting it, and George's gloomy brow lightened a little.

'Acting doesn't exactly wash,' he muttered. Then, suddenly, 'I'm sure I never meant any harm to Burnet; and he sees now—at least he says—it was his own fault.'

'Does he? I daresay he does,' said Juliet dryly.

'Yes, I'm awfully glad he's all right again. I believe I did cut up rather rough, but I didn't know he was thought so much of among professionals, so—naturally perhaps—he wanted his own way with us. But, Miss Juliet, I—I—everything conspired. Those aristocrats at Rotherwood made me feel out of it; and—and if I have been a fool, I have my feelings, and they're as real as other people's.'

'Yes, George,' said Juliet, more gently than a few weeks ago she knew how to speak; 'I am sure you have. I am sorry I seemed unkind at Rotherwood, but there was no use in having mistakes made, you know. It had nothing to do with the grand people.'

'I suppose you thought it was awful presumption—but—others——'

Juliet flushed to the roots of her hair and the tips of her fingers.

'I don't think of it so,' she said steadily. 'But I hope you'll give up thinking of it. Let us all be good friends again. We none of us knew what we were
about when we set off together. But I hope no one will be the worse for it in the end.'

Aunt Anne's affairs occupied the mind of the family on the Thursday evening when the Planet was to reopen, and all were so full of wedding festivities and wedding tours that no one had a word to say as to an event so much more in accordance with their recent occupations.

Only Juliet watched the clock, and knew the moment when the curtain would draw up, and the critical hours begin.

It was a relief when Dolph, as he gave her her candle after prayers, said in an anxious whisper, 'Miss Juliet, they're in the middle of it now!'

'Yes. It—it's sure to go well, Dolph.'

'Oh yes, miss, it couldn't fail. Mr. Burnet couldn't. But O miss, can't you feel how his heart must be beating?'

Juliet avoided a reply to this query, but her own heart beat fast as she lay in her quiet room, and followed the scenes to herself. She knew well enough how they went.

When she came downstairs the next morning Dolph stood at the foot with his hands full of newspapers.

'It's all right, Miss Juliet, I've run out to buy all the papers. It's the elegantest theatre, the decorations are æsthetic, and the comforts of the audience attended to. And the play's a new departure, and yet well adapted to the stage. And the author and the manager were called on. And Mr. Clarence Burnet—here miss, look in the Daily News—has scored a decided success: "His fine presence and powerful voice were aids to his subtle impersonation. . . .
received with great applause. Miss Lilla Carew wanted force in the part of Gertrude.” Ah, miss, that should have been you.’

‘Adolphus, why are the cloth and the knife-tray left promiscuous on the sideboard?’ suddenly demanded the voice of James.

‘Coming, sir, coming! The time’s out of joint for knife-trays,’ and Dolph rushed forward and sounded the gong, with triumph in every thud.

The papers were not all equally laudatory, but they were all interested. ‘Raymond Rivers’ was evidently going to be a theme for discussion, and at least three different readings of his ‘subtle’ character were given in three leading journals. Miss Dorset collected the papers and read them all carefully through, then she laid them down with a deep sigh. Juliet would have liked to defy her own embarrassment and discuss the criticisms, but her tongue was tied.

Miss Dorset kissed her tenderly as she took leave of her ‘O my dear, take thought,’ she whispered.

They had to cross London on their way to Monks’ Warren. ‘One Soul and Two Faces’ met their eyes on all the hoardings; and at Waterloo Station they met Alaric, who greeted them, saying that he had been up for the great night, and the supper afterwards, where author, manager, and actors, had all been jubilant. He was much too full of it to talk of anything else as they went down in the train.

‘It’s a good piece enough,’ he said, ‘but it’s made by the one part; Raymond is on nearly from beginning to end, and has to run through the whole gamut of emotions. You know the story, Lady Willingham; the man has two lives, a good and a bad one. The point is that the bad side eats into the good, and he
begins to lose the heroine's affections and to shock her; then the sense of this brings remorse into his other side, and at last the good triumphs, or at least conquers, for he is left penitent and only dimly hoping to be forgiven. That's why it won't altogether go down. The girl is a weak part, and conventionally played, but Clarence has evolved a wonderful personality out of Raymond; a very uncomfortable one!'

'It must be a very fatiguing piece?' said Selva.

'Oh yes. But he went off this morning as soon as he had read all the critiques to look up some scenes which did not satisfy him. He'll play it better still to-night.'

'Does he care much about the critiques?' said Juliet.

'Why, he must. You see he undertook a frightful responsibility, for my uncle did not half like the wicked hero. The character is almost his own invention, and he would back up the author in making him suffer to the last, and yet giving him hope. The British public would rather he had been hung, or proved innocent of all his misdeeds. But Clarence says the stage shouldn't lag behind the standing of all other art. He's right, I think.'

Alaric was so eager, and the discussion of the play was so obvious, that personal feelings had to be suppressed. Juliet could have listened for ever, but Lewis and Selva's views of the drama were of a much more surface kind, and neither of them thought of helping to elucidate moral problems. That would not have occurred to them if they had been producing Hamlet.

Moreover, Lewis did not take to Alaric, whom he thought eccentric, and as he listened and answered
politely, inwardly he did not bless the day when he had asked Clarence Burnet to come to Clarebridge.

Mrs. Lambourne was a much more congenial person both to Sir Lewis and to his wife, and when they arrived at Monks' Warren Park children and tea-cups formed a pleasant diversion. There were no other guests in the house, and Saturday was spent in the usual routine of a quiet visit, seeing the old church, walking round the gardens, driving, and so on. Randall's prospects were referred to, and Alaric laughed a little about the very superior young lady who was to keep him in order for the rest of his life. It had been very good for her, he said, to have to forgive him, and to ask him to forgive her for the severity which had made him afraid to face her after the affair of the gates. She had been very miserable, and they were much more likely now to understand one another.

In the evening Sir James and Lady Manningham came to dinner, with other neighbours, by way evidently of smoking the pipe of peace; but Juliet fancied that their host did not altogether enjoy the entertainment. There was a new stile and a freshly-made path in the corner of Monks' Warren Park to which its neighbour could not reconcile himself, and his remarks on the scarcity of his pheasants, to Sir Lewis, were not without point.

On the Sunday afternoon Mrs. Lambourne asked Selva and Juliet if they would walk down to the village with her, and pay a visit to old Mr. Burnet.

Alaric, she said, wanted to take Sir Lewis to see Mr. Worthing, his agent and an old friend.

Juliet had had a sense all the time that consultations had been going on in her absence, and felt as she went to get ready that it was all part of the
programme, all arranged on purpose, and a slight sense of rebellion rose within her.

She put on her dark red coat and cap trimmed with gray fur, a new dress since the days of Clarebridge, and walked across the park, which was bright with the sweet faint tints of early winter sunshine. They talked about the view and the country. The lodge-keeper's children curtsied, and they passed on down a lane from which they turned into a suburban street of shops on one side and smart little houses on the other. The shops were, of course, closed, and over the most important one was 'Philip Burnet, Monks' Warren Grocery Stores,' in freshly gilt and highly ornate letters.

Mrs. Lambourne rang at the side door, a neat little maid opened it, and they were shown up into a smart and comfortable drawing-room fitted up with brilliant blue rep, a good deal softened down by art muslin; a bright fire was burning, on the table was a basket of wax flowers under a glass shade, and on the mantelpiece some Devonshire pottery.

Mrs. Burnet was sitting by the fire with a book of sermons, and her youngest daughter was reading a magazine. The mother was a large sensible-looking woman, in a good Sunday gown, manifestly the wife of a prosperous small country town tradesman. She called Mrs. Lambourne 'My dear,' and Selva 'my lady,' and cast a scrutinising glance at Juliet. The girl, who attended the Warrenstoke High School, and to whom the art muslin was probably owing, was dark and graceful, and began to entertain Juliet shyly, but with manners quite on a different level from her mother's, while Selva made herself agreeable, a little in the style of a Primrose Dame at an election.
In a few minutes the door opened, and, to Juliet's amazement, Clarence and a youth about twenty came in.

'My son Clarence came down from London this morning,' said Mrs. Burnet, 'and this is Philip, who assists his father in the business.'

Philip drew back behind his sister and looked rather as if he were suppressing amusement. Clarence was very grave, till, as Selva began a congratulation, he smiled a little as he said aside, 'My mother will not like us to talk about the theatre on Sunday.' The sister looked all eyes and eagerness, and Mrs. Burnet said to her—

'Katie, we must offer the ladies a cup of tea.'

Mrs. Lambourne knew better than to say it was too early, and in a minute the tea, which evidently only waited the signal, appeared in the correctest style, and behind it Mr. Philip Burnet himself, bearing a large Bible, as he had just come in from his Sunday-school, and quite free from the consciousness affecting the others. As he assured them, he was very glad to welcome his son's friends, while Juliet felt exactly as if she was seeing Mr. Belville playing the part of a pious old tradesman, and playing it uncommonly well.

Katie poured out the tea and Clarence handed it, managing to upset his mother's over her best gown.

'Never mind, my dear,' she said, as he apologised nervously; and a look of pride, perplexity, and of mother love underlying it all, crossed her face as she watched this splendid son, who clashed with every principle and prejudice within her; who had never, since earliest boyhood, belonged to her, and yet who, at this most critical moment of his life, had insisted on being thus found among his own people.
'Well, I think we ought to be getting back, Lady Willingham,' said Mrs. Lambourne presently. 'Clarence, you will come back with us? Alaric is looking out for you.'

'Thank you; yes,' he said, and as they rose, he went up to his mother again—

'I hope the dress isn't spoiled, mother?' he said.

'No, my dear,' she said, and kissed him, whispering something which he hastily silenced.

'There, mother,' cried Katie vehemently, as the door closed on the visitors, 'you see she is not at all theatrical. She is just as lady-like as cousin Emily herself.'

'She's an awfully pretty girl,' said young Philip.

'Well, well,' said the father, 'we could have wished Clarence hadn't chosen a wife connected with the stage. But there's no doubt it might have been worse—it might have been worse by a great deal.'

Meanwhile the others walked across the park in the red level light of the setting sun, with commonplace talk, till Emily and Selva fell back somehow and disappeared among the trees. Clarence paused as they came up the garden to a sheltered corner under the terrace wall, where were seats and a table and a full view westward of the wide heath, lost in golden rosy mist. Then he said, in a voice low, hurried, and with none of the tones in which Romeo had urged his passion—

'Since you are here, you must at least be willing to listen to—to what you must know well already. Otherwise, they would not have let you come. But I was determined that I would wait to see if I had fair success to offer you, and also to let you know the
whole of the life I ask you to share. Whatever it is, you know I lay it at your feet—you know——’

Juliet was standing with her back against the table and her face averted.

‘You couldn’t think I should mind anything of that sort,’ she said, half defiantly.

‘Oh, but,’ he said, ‘you will mind it. Sometimes there will be something to mind. And that’s not all! It’s a hard life that I ask you to share, a life that’s trying to body and soul, a life neither I nor any man can live unscathed altogether. A pushing glaring world in which I must live, though gladly would I keep you out of it——’

‘No!’ she exclaimed, drawing away from him.

‘You mustn’t ask that of me! I can’t give it up. It’s myself, and if I wasn’t true to it I should—oh, I shouldn’t have any truth in me. I can’t give that up for you.’

‘I don’t ask it; but don’t you see how hardly I may try you? I might make conditions for you. I might be unreasonable, jealous. Why, I was jealous of Alaric when he played my parts, though you know I’d kiss the dirt off his feet. I might try your love and faith.’

‘You have no faith,’ said Juliet. ‘If—if——’

She stopped, then took her courage in both hands, and looked him in the face——

‘It is working together, and helping each other, and sharing the fight, that is the beautiful thing. What would be the worth of loving if one was afraid?’

She stood before him with the sunlight on her young face and fearless eyes.

‘O Juliet—my Juliet!’ he cried, as he clasped her in his arms. ‘God help me! you shall not
repent your trust, if love—oh, every word that even Shakespeare ever wrote is too weak for what I would say. He knew nothing about it.'

'No—I am not afraid,' said Juliet presently. 'But oh, don't ever tell me to give up acting, for you'll make a mistake if you do—and—and if you ask me now, I'm afraid I should—promise. But acting wouldn't give up me.'

'Then it isn't only the actor you care for? I've been jealous of Romeo and Orlando sometimes, and yet, when you acted better with Alaric than with me—I was miserable.'

'If you were a girl you would know why that was!' said Juliet shyly.

'But I'm not a girl. Tell me.'

'No,' said Juliet. 'But you needn't mind, for—I shouldn't have said no, even if you had been a clergyman like David!'

'Madam!' a voice sounded from the terrace above, in the very accents of Juliet's nurse.

'Ha, Alaric!' cried Clarence, starting forward, while Juliet flew past, up the terrace steps, and Alaric, coming down them, seized Clarence's hands in his own. They said but little, eloquent as were both their tongues, indeed they understood each other too well to need many words. Presently Clarence said, 'Hadn't I better go and find Willingham?'

'Perhaps. But he disclaims any right of control; Juliet is of age, and Miss Dorset, who is the only person that has any claim on her, seems to have succumbed to your fascinations. Besides, he must know that it is all his own doing. He started the theatrical mania, and he asked you to join his company. I suppose he did not know that the genuine dramatic
fire was not easily put out. I have got him, I think, to understand as much about you as comes within his sphere of comprehension.'

'Ay,' said Clarence, 'your vocation is to get people to understand each other, and to make them fit to understand each other?'

'Is it?' said Alaric. 'I often feel as if people misunderstood me. I don't always understand myself. But,' he added, after a moment, 'if one has got hold of an idea, of course one wants others to have the benefit of it.'

Clarence looked at the delicate face and smiling wistful eyes, and his own softened with many memories. He thought of Alaric's generous love, and constant desire not so much to give as to share; how he had held nothing back, had only been eager to help his kinsman to the knowledge and the speech, the feelings and the instincts, which so many, who would gladly give out of all other abundance, regard as their own incommunicable right. Clarence did not think how much good sense and talent, innate delicacy, and noble power of appreciation had enabled him to receive what his cousin had given; or of all the faithful affection with which he had repaid him. He took Alaric's slender hand in his own and squeezed it hard.

'I owe her to you,' he said, and hurried away in search of Sir Lewis.

Alaric stood still and thought of what this dear and life-long friend had said. The alternatives of action which his peculiar circumstances and temperament allowed him were so small that he often felt that he gave to them a disproportionate amount of feeling. There was often so little difference between the thing he did and the thing he would not do.
But helping people to understand one another might open a way for stronger feet to tread; this power might be the consolation for the dissatisfactions and disabilities of being only a bit of a squire, not quite the whole of an artist, half a high-bred fastidious gentleman, and half the son of a class to which the gentleman's privileges were odious. From the half-way house he saw both ways.
CHAPTER XXXVII

COUPLES COMING TO THE ARK

Just after the return from Monks' Warren Agnes had received a note from David Merrifield, telling her that he had important tidings and should be at Ousehaven for a couple of hours that afternoon. It cannot be said that the intelligence was received with enthusiasm by the family, who were still inclined to grieve for Ernley Armytage, though the Capsicum was apparently his present love. Aunt Marian moaned that one pair of lovers was enough at Once for a household, and Lewis indulged in some disrespect about parsons, and supposed that the fellow had got some twopenny-halfpenny living, and would not get the twopence out of the tithes; but he dared not say so before Agnes, who would have looked on such an observation more seriously than it was meant.

David Merrifield arrived at luncheon-time, and was very fairly appreciated. He said Rigg, or Randall, was nearly recovered, and that he believed Mr. Lambourne had done more to impress the young man than any one else. Moreover, there was reason to think that a quarrel with his young woman had had something to do with his aberrations. She was a highly respectable girl, and had objected to the socialistic company he was keeping, and it had been
decided, with Mr. Lambourne's assistance, to send the pair out to Mr. Merrifield's brothers at Brisbane, where they were pretty certain of employment and prosperity, and the old mother was trying to make up her mind whether to go with them or not.

After luncheon Major O'Connor carried his Anne off house-hunting, and the others retired to Miss Dorset's sitting-room. By and by it was made known to them that Mr. Mohun, still unable to give up the hopes of David, had set forth to endeavour to secure the influence of those whom the Vicar most regarded.

Admiral Merrifield had said that Mr. Mohun was very good, and it was just what he could have wished, but David was the most resolute of all his sons, especially where duty was concerned, and, even were it otherwise, he should not dare to interfere with what a clergyman felt to be his vocation, but perhaps if Canon Wharton advised it, David might yield to his representations.

However when, proceeding to Coalham, Mr. Mohun talked the matter over with the Canon, they somehow came to the understanding that, since an illness in the spring, that good man had been wishing to retire on a smaller field of labour, and that as Coalham was in the gift of his own Chapter, he could secure that David Merrifield was appointed as his successor to the parent parish, a benefice which, though diminished by the districts formed by himself, still was an ample provision, and carried with it a delightful house and grounds, which he had made a breathing-place for his people. Only the certainty of putting Mr. Merrifield in his place could induce him to resign, but with this arrangement he would thankfully accept Beechcroft,
and, moreover, keep the old Curate for the times he was in residence.

So David, glad and thankful, had come to lay all before Agnes, and even ask her if it were possible for her to be married in time to begin their real work with Lent.

And why not? since there was nothing on either side to be settled? And how great was Agnes's joy and thankfulness in thus being made one with the guide she loved, being quit of the tasks of which she felt doubtful, and having her life work in direct service.

As to Juliet's affairs, nobody dared to tell Rupert of them till his return at Christmas with all the credit that as yet he could have acquired at Oxford.

'One comfort is, you are all sickened of that tomfoolery,' he observed. 'What makes you look so queer?'

Then Agnes took him in private and told him Juliet's destination.

How indignant he was there is no describing. He was thankful that she was not his sister. He said the only tolerable part was that she would change her name and not disgrace the family. He said it served Lewis right for dragging them all through the mire that she should stick there, and he really made such an uproar that Lewis was obliged to take to defending her. He told the young lady that she had come to what her folly deserved, and she meekly said with a twinkle in her eye that, 'So she hoped.'

Though her marriage was not to take place immediately, the wedding would be practically the end of her home life. She had remained at Monks' Warren for a week or two, had been taken to London by the Lambournes to see 'One Soul and Two Faces,'
had practised elocution under Alaric's directions, and had become very much at home with him. Clarence came for another Sunday and Monday morning with her, when their future plans were settled. She was to come to London, and be put, as Clarence had originally proposed, under Miss Lascelles's charge and tuition, and so learn what her chosen profession was really like. The actress, a kind and hearty person, took a lively interest in Clarence's choice, and promised to do all in her power to help her on.

She was going on tour in the course of the spring, under favourable circumstances, and undertook to take Juliet with her, and give her opportunities of practice in various parts, an arrangement with which Clarence's scruples as to the care due to his lady were, perforce, satisfied.

He could not hide from Juliet that, if she made a hit, and if she proved capable of playing leading parts, it would be a great thing professionally for his uncle, himself, and the Planet. There was a dazzling chance before them, and his heart was too much in his calling to be indifferent to it.

'But if, after all, it comes too hard on you, if your heart fails you at the last, promise to tell me. Else I won't let you go.'

'You won't let me?' said Juliet.

'No,' he said smiling. 'Remember, all you do will be for my great gain, and I will have none of it if it makes your heart or your finger ache.'

'Oh, how clever men are,' said Juliet ironically. 'Of course, helping you isn't at all likely to make one persevere. But I'll promise fifty times over, if you like, because my heart isn't going to fail. I'm not going to give up my success, if you will!' But,
Clarence, and suddenly her mobile face was illuminated by a look of deep and passionate feeling, hitherto unknown: 'I'll tell you the truth, "sad brow and true maid"—it is for you, and for all I've said I'd fail to make you succeed. But I'll succeed for you instead. Don't be afraid; what can I mind when we help each other. Alaric says, Art is telling the world great truths. Isn't it lovely to tell them together?'

'I don't think anything can hurt you,' said Clarence brokenly, as he clasped her close.

His stately figure was an object of greater curiosity at Ousehaven, on the occasion of the double wedding, than either of the bridegrooms.

For it was a double wedding. Anne Dorset had hung back from the idea; she thought aunt and niece would look rather absurd in the newspaper, and that she should be thought to be trying to ape or rival her young niece's youth and beauty.

On the other hand, this allegation made the Major furious, and he maintained, to the diversion of all auditors, that forty-two (?) was a far handsomer age than twenty-two; that Agnes was a sweet girl, but that she couldn't hold a candle to Anne.

Moreover, Miss Dorset wished to have 'only one trouble,' and when Anne begged to have her wedding over quietly in the morning, or better still, a day or two beforehand, there was a general outcry that the contrast would not be fitting, and so she submitted to everything except absolute white and no bonnet.

Her bridesmaids were, besides Juliet, old friends and neighbours; but Agnes was to import David's two little nieces, as his sisters called themselves too old, also his cousins, Gillian and Mysie Merrifield, the whole
of this party being lodged with the parents at Armytage Park, where Ernley obtained leave to meet them.

It was reported that Gillian fought off to the very last any idea that so sensible a man as Mr. Armytage could be 'after any nonsense.'

The weddings were like all other weddings of an old-fashioned sort, for they took place in the morning, and were followed by a breakfast and speeches in the olden style.

One toast, however, was, to say the least, unusual. Mr. Armytage, the Squire, proposed the health of the 'Wills o' the Wisp,' and congratulations on the happy, if unexpected, results that had caused them, as he picturesquely put it, finally to explode in a blaze of light.

Then all the late members of the 'Wills o' the Wisp' Company stood up and bowed, as Sir Lewis prepared to return thanks. Dolph helped to pour out the champagne, and then was called over to stand by his master's side and bow his thanks with the others.

Sir Lewis looked round with a half-humorous, half-rueful glance.

He said that three months ago it had hardly seemed likely that such a gathering as the present should ever take place. Enough had already been said as to the new scenes in which the brides would now be called upon to take a part. He must say that the recent brilliant success of Mr. Clarence Burnet must always reflect a lustre on the brief career of the company to which he had been so great an assistance. His light had swallowed up one of their brightest flames. He offered his best wishes to Adolphus Cobb, to whom he hoped the 'Wills o' the Wisp' had not proved misguiding torches. But for himself and his wife, and he might
add, Mr. George Buckley, also lately a member of their company, marsh-fires and footlights would in future shine in vain. They had come to the conclusion that the claims of business and the domestic hearth were more suitable spheres for their talents, and that, after all, "Stageland" was not their vocation!

'It's well there's some one left to look after Aunt Minnie,' said Selva, in the midst of the cheering, to the Admiral; 'and you know, it did not do for the baby.'

'The home-life at the Wharf House may thus be guessed at. Major and Mrs. O'Connor almost formed a part of it. Agnes Merrifield's inner and outer life were now in harmony, and her high and pure desires for the best sort of goodness were likely to be fulfilled. While as for Juliet, if she had chosen to walk in a far more perilous path, she had strong and loving hands to uphold her, and a chance of setting an example of pure and noble womanhood worthy of the highest aspirations.

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