МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

NEIGHBOURS ON THE GREEN; MY FAITHFUL JOHNNY

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Neighbours on the Green; My Faithful Johnny

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MY NEIGHBOUR NELLY

CHAPTER I

They were both my neighbours, of course: but to apportion one's heart's love in equal shares according to the claims of justice is a very different matter. I saw as much of one sister as the other. And Martha was an excellent girl, quite honest and friendly and good; but as for Ellen, there never could be any question about her. One did not even think of discriminating which were her special good qualities. She was Ellen, that was enough; or Nelly, which I prefer, for my part. We all lived at Dinglefield Green in these old days. It is a model of a village, in one sense of the word; not the kind of place, it is true, to which the name is generally applied, but a village *orné*, as there are cottages *ornés*. The real little hamlet, where the poor people lived, was at a little distance, and gave us plenty of occupation and trouble. But for Dinglefield Green proper, it was such a

village as exists chiefly in novels. The Green was the central point, a great triangular breadth of soft grass, more like a small common than a village green, with the prettiest houses round—houses inclosed in their own grounds,—houses at the very least embosomed in pretty gardens, peeping out from among the trees. None of us were very rich; nor was there anything that could be called a 'place' in the circle of dwellings. But I believe there was as much good blood and good connection among us as are rarely to be found even in a much larger community. The great house opposite, which was separated from the green by a ha-ha, and opened to us only a pretty sweep of lawn, looking almost like a park, belonged to Sir Thomas Denzil, whose pedigree, as everybody knows, is longer than the Queen's. Next to him was Mrs. Stoke's pretty cottage who was—one of the Stokes who have given their name to places all over the country: the son is now General Stoke, a C.B., and I don't know what besides: and her daughter married Lord Leamington. Next to that—but it is needless to give a directory of the place: probably our neighbours, in their different habitations, may appear in their proper persons before my story is done.

The sisters lived next to me; my house lay, as their father said, athwart their bows. The Admiral was too much a gentleman to talk ship, or shop, as the gentlemen call it, in ordinary conversation; but he did say that my cottage lay athwart his bows; and the girls admitted that it would have been unpleasant had it been anybody but me. I was then a rather young widow, and

having no children, did not want much of a house. My cottage was very pretty. I think myself that there was not so pretty a room in all the green as my drawing-room; but it was small. My house stood with its gable-end to the green, and fronted the hedge which was the boundary of Admiral Fortis' grounds. His big gate and my small one were close together. If the hedge had been cut down, I should have commanded a full view of the lawn before his house, and the door; and nobody could have gone out or come in without my inspection. They were so friendly, that it was once proposed to cut it down, and give me and my flowers more air; but we both reflected that we were mortal; circumstances might change with both of us; I might die, and some one else come to the cottage whose inspection might not be desirable; or the Admiral might die, and his girls marry, and strangers come. In short, the end of it was that the hedge remained; but instead of being a thick holly wall, like the rest of my inclosure, it was a picturesque hedge of hawthorn, which was very sweet in spring and a perfect mass of convolvulus in autumn; and it had gaps in it and openings. Nelly herself made a round cutting just opposite my window, and twined the honeysuckle into a frame for it. I could see them through it as I sat at work. I could see them at their croquet, and mounting their horses at the door, and going out for their walks, and doing their capricious gardening. Indeed it was Nelly only who ever attempted to work in the garden; the other was afraid of her hands and her complexion, and a hundred things. Nelly was not

afraid of anything—not even of Mr. Nicholson, the gardener, who filled me with awe and trembling. Perhaps you may say that there was not much fear of her complexion. She was brown, to begin with; but the prettiest brown—clear, with crimson flushes that went and came, and changed her aspect every moment. Her eyes were the softest dark eyes I ever saw; they did not penetrate or flash or sparkle, but glowed on you with a warm lambent light. In winter, with her red cloak on, she was the prettiest little figure; and the cold suited her, and made her glow and bound about like a creature of air. As for Martha, she was a great deal larger and whiter than her sister. I suppose, on the whole, she was the prettier of the two, though she did not please me so well. They were their father's only children, and he was very fond of them. Their mother had been dead so long that they had no recollection of her; and the girls were not without those defects which girls brought up by a man are so apt to have. They were rather disposed to think that anything could be had for a little coaxing. Perhaps they had more confidence in their own blandishments than is common with girls, and were more ready to use them, knowing how powerless papa was against their arts. They were badly educated, for the same reason. The Admiral was too fond of them to part with them; and he was one of the men who fear reports and rumours, and would not have a lady, not even a middle-aged governess, in his house. He had expensive masters for his girls, and the girls did what they pleased with those excellent gentlemen, and grew up with the very smallest

amount of education compatible with civilization. I rather liked it, I confess, in Nelly, who was very bright, and asked about everything, and jumped at an understanding of most things she heard of. But it did not answer in Martha's case, who was not bright, and was the sort of girl who wanted to be taught music, for instance, properly, and to practise six hours a day. Without being taught, and without practising, the good girl (for Nelly, as she explained, had no taste for music) thought it her duty to play to amuse her friends; and the result was a trial to the temper of Dinglefield Green. We had some very good musicians among us, and Martha heard them continually, but never was enlightened as to the nature of her own performance; whereas Nelly knew and grew crimson every time her sister approached the piano. But Nelly was my favourite, as everybody knew; and perhaps, as a natural consequence, I did her sister less than justice.

We led a very pleasant, neighbourly life in those days. Some of us were richer, and some poorer; but we all visited each other. The bigger houses asked the smaller ones to dinner, and did not disdain to pay a return visit to tea. In the summer afternoons, if you crossed the Green (and could hear anything for the noise the cricketers made) you would be sure to hear, in one quarter or another, the click of the croquet balls, and find all the young people of the place assembled over their game, not without groups of the elder ones sitting round on the edge of the well-mown lawns. When I settled there first, I was neither young nor old, and there was a difficulty which party to class

me with; but by degrees I found my place among the mothers, or aunts, or general guardians of the society; and by degrees my young neighbours came to be appropriated to me as my particular charge. We walked home together, and we went to parties together; and, of course, a little gossip got up about the Admiral—gossip which was entirely without foundation, for I detest second marriages, and indeed have had quite enough of it for my part. But Nelly took a clinging to me—I don't say a fancy, which would be too light a word. She had never known a woman intimately before—never one older than herself, to whom she was half a child and half a companion. And she liked it, and so did I.

There was one absurd peculiarity about the two girls, which I shall always think was the foundation of all the mischief. They never called each other, nor were called, by their names. They were 'the Sisters' to everybody. I suppose it was a fancy of their father's—he called them 'the Sisters' always. They called each other Sister when they spoke to or of each other. It annoyed me at first, and I made an attempt to change the custom. But Martha disliked her name. She had been called after her grandmother, and she thought it was a shame. 'Martha and Ellen!' she said indignantly. 'What could papa be thinking of? It sounds like two old women in the alms-houses. And other girls have such pretty names. If you call me Martha, Mrs. Mulgrave, I will never speak to you again.' When one thought of it, it was a hard case. I felt for her, for my own name is Sarah, and I remember the trouble it was

to me when I was a girl; and the general use and wont of course overcame me at last. They were called 'the Sisters' everywhere on the Green. I believe some of us did not even know their proper names. I said mischief might come of it, and they laughed at me; but there came a time when Nelly, at least, laughed at me no more.

It was in the early summer that young Llewellyn came to stay with the Denzils at their great house opposite. He was a distant cousin of theirs, which was a warrant that his family was all that could be desired. And he had a nice little property in Wales, which had come to him unexpectedly on the death of an elder brother. And, to crown all, he was a sailor, having gone into the navy when he was a second son. Of course, being a naval man, it was but natural that he should be brought to the Admiral first of all. And he very soon got to be very intimate in the house; and indeed, for that matter, in every house on the Green. I believe it is natural to sailors to have that hearty, cordial way. He came to see me, though I had no particular attraction for him, as cheerfully as if I had been a girl, or alas! had girls of my own. Perhaps it was the opening in the hedge that pleased him. He would sit and look—but he did not speak to me of the sisters, more's the pity. He was shy of that subject. I could see he was in real earnest, as the children say, by his shyness about the girls. He would begin to say something, and then rush on to another subject, and come back again half an hour after to the identical point he had started from. But I suppose it never occurred to him that I had any skill

to fathom that. He went with them on all their picnics, and was at all their parties; and he rode with them, riding very well for a sailor. The rides are beautiful round Dinglefield. There is a royal park close at hand, where you can lose yourself in grassy glades and alleys without number. I had even been tempted to put myself on my old pony, and wander about with them on the springy turf under the trees; though, as for their canterings and gallopings, and the way in which Nelly's horse kicked its heels about when it got excited, they were always alarming to me. But it was a pleasant life. There is something in that moment of existence when the two who are to go together through life see each other first, and are mysteriously attracted towards each other, and forswear their own ideal and all their dreams, and mate themselves, under some secret compulsion which they do not understand—I say there is something in such a moment which throws a charm over life to all their surroundings. Though it be all over for us; though perhaps we may have been in our own persons thoroughly disenchanted, or may even have grown bitter in our sense of the difference between reality and romance, still the progress of an incipient wooing gives a zest to our pleasure. There is something in the air, some magical influence, some glamour, radiating from the hero and the heroine. When everything is settled, and the wedding looms in sight, fairyland melts away, and the lovers are no more interesting than any other pair. It is perhaps the uncertainty, the chance of disaster; the sense that one may take flight or offence, or that some rival may come in, or a

hundred things happen to dissipate the rising tenderness. There is the excitement of a drama about it—a drama subject to the curious contradictions of actual existence, and utterly regardless of all the unities. I thought I could see the little sister, who was my pet and favourite, gradually grouping thus with young Llewellyn. They got together somehow, whatever the arrangements of the party might be. They might drive to the Dingle, which was our favourite spot, in different carriages, with different parties, and at different times; but they were always to be found together under the trees when everybody had arrived. Perhaps they did not yet know it themselves; but other people began to smile, and Lady Denzil, I could see, was watching Nelly. She had other views, I imagine, for her young cousin since he came to the estate. Nelly, too, once had very different views. I knew what her ideal was. It, or rather he, was a blonde young giant, six feet tall at least, with blue eyes, and curling golden hair. He was to farm his own land, and live a country life, and be of no profession; and he was to be pure Saxon, to counterbalance a little defect in Nelly's race, or rather, as she supposed, in her complexion, occasioned by the fact that her mother was of Spanish blood. Such was her ideal, as she had often confided to me. It was funny to see how this gigantic and glorious vision melted out of her mind. Llewellyn was not very tall; he was almost as dark as Nelly; he was a sailor, and he was a Welshman. What did it matter? One can change one's ideal so easily when one is under twenty. Perhaps in his imagination he had loved a milk-white maiden too.

Lady Denzil however watched, having, as I shall always believe, other intentions in her mind for Llewellyn, though she had no daughter of her own; and I am sure it was her influence which hurried him away the last day, without taking leave of any of us. She kept back the telegram which summoned him to join his ship, until there was just time to get the train. And so he had to rush away, taking off his hat to us, and almost getting out of the window of the carriage in his eagerness, when he saw us at the Admiral's door, as he dashed past to the station.

'Good-bye, for the moment,' he shouted; 'I hope I am coming back.' And I could see, by the colour in Nelly's cheek, that their eyes had met, and understood each other. Her sister bowed and smiled very graciously, and chattered about a hundred things.

'I wonder why he is going in such a hurry? I wonder what he means about coming back?' said Martha. 'I am sure I am very sorry he is gone. He was very nice, and always ready for anything. What a bore a ship is! I remember when papa was like that—always rushing away. Don't you, Sister?—but you were too young.'

'I remember hearing people talk of it,' said Nelly with a sigh.

She was *rêveuse*, clouded over, everything that it was natural to be under the circumstances. She would not trust herself to say he was nice. It was I who had to answer, and keep up the conversation for her. For my own part, I confess I was vexed that he had gone so soon—that he had gone without an explanation. These things are far better to be settled out of hand. A man has

to go away when his duty calls; but nobody can make sure when he may come back, or what he may find when he comes back. I was sorry, for I knew a hundred things might happen to detain, or keep him silent; and Nelly's heart was caught, I could see. She had been quite unsuspecting, unfearing; and it was gone ere she understood what she was doing. My heart quaked a little for her; not with any fear of the result, but only with a certain throbbing of experience and anxiety that springs therefrom. Experience does not produce hope in the things of this world. It lays one's heart open to suspicions and fears which never trouble the innocent. It was not because of anything I had seen in Llewellyn; but because I had seen a great deal of the world, and things in general. This was why I kissed her with a little extra meaning, and told her to lie down on the sofa when she got home.

'You have not been looking your best for some days,' I said. 'You are not a giantess, nor so robust as you pretend to be. You must take care of yourself.' And Nelly, though she made no reply, kissed me in her clinging way in return.

Some weeks passed after that without any particular incident. Things went on in their usual way, and though we were all sorry that Llewellyn was gone, we made no particular moan over him after the first. It was very rarely that a day passed on which I did not see the sisters; but the weather was beginning to get cold, and one Friday there was a fog which prevented me from going out. Ours is a low country, with a great many trees, and the river is not far off; and when there is a fog, it is very dreary and

overwhelming. It closes in over the Green, so that you cannot see an inch before you; and the damp creeps into your very bones: though it was only the end of October, the trees hung invisible over our heads in heavy masses, now and then dropping a faded leaf out of the fog in a ghostly, silent way: and the chill went to one's heart. I had a new book, for which I was very thankful, and my fire burned brightly, and I did not stir out of doors all day. I confess it surprised me a little that the girls did not come in to me in the evening, as they had a way of doing, with their red cloaks round them, and the hoods over their heads, like Red Riding Hood. But I took it for granted they had some friends from town, or something pleasant on hand; though I had not heard any carriage driving up. As for seeing, that was impossible. Next morning, by a pleasant change, was bright, sunny, and frosty. For the first time that season, the hedges and gardens, and even the Green itself, was crisp and white with hoar-frost, which, of course, did not last, but gave us warning of winter. When I went out, I met Nelly just leaving her own door. She was in her red cloak, with her dress tucked up, and the little black hat with the red feather, which was always so becoming to her. But either it was not becoming that day, or there was something the matter with the child. I don't remember whether I have said that she had large eyes—eyes that, when she was thinner than usual, or ill, looked out of proportion to the size of her face. They had this effect upon me that day. One did not seem to see Nelly at all; but only a big pair of wistful, soft eyes looking at one, with shadowy

lines round them. I was alarmed, to tell the truth, whenever I saw her. Either something had happened, or the child was ill.

'Good morning, my dear,' I said, 'I did not see you all yesterday, and it feels like a year. Were you coming to me now?'

'No,' said Nelly—and even in the sound of her voice there was something changed—'it is so long since I have been in the village. I had settled to go down there this morning, and take poor Mary Jackson some warm socks we have been knitting for the babies. It is so cold to-day.'

'I thought you never felt the cold,' said I, as one does without thinking. 'You are always as merry as a cricket in the winter weather, when we are all shivering. You know you never feel the cold.'

'No,' said Nelly again. 'I suppose it is only the first chill'—and she gave me a strange little sick smile, and suddenly looked down and stooped to pick up something. I saw in a moment there was nothing to pick up. Could it be that there were tears in her eyes, which she wanted to hide? 'But I must go now,' she went on hurriedly. 'Oh, no, don't think of coming with me; it is too cold, and I shall have to walk fast, I am in such a hurry. Good-bye.'

I could do nothing but stand and stare after her when she had gone on. What did it mean? Nelly was not given to taking fancies, or losing her temper—at least not in this way. She walked away so rapidly that she seemed to vanish out of my sight, and never once looked round or turned aside for anything. The surprise was so great that I actually forgot where I was going. It could not be

for nothing that she had changed like this. I went back to my own door, and then I came out again and opened the Admiral's gate. Probably Martha was at home, and would know what was the matter. As I was going in, Martha met me coming out. She was in her red cloak, like Nelly, and she had a letter in her hand. When she saw me she laughed, and blushed a little. 'Will you come with me to the post, Mrs. Mulgrave?' she said. 'Sister would not wait for me; and when one has an important letter to post–' Martha went on, holding it up to me, and laughing and blushing again.

'What makes it so very important?' said I; and I confess that I tried very hard to make out the address.

'Oh, didn't she tell you?' said Martha. 'What a funny girl she is! If it had been me I should have rushed all over the Green, and told everybody. It is—can't you guess?'

And she held out to me the letter in her hand. It was addressed to 'Captain Llewellyn, H.M.S. *Spitfire*, Portsmouth.' I looked at it, and I looked at her, and wonder took possession of me. The address was in Martha's handwriting. It was she who was going to post it; it was she who, conscious and triumphant, giggling a little and blushing a little, stood waiting for my congratulations. I looked at her aghast, and my tongue failed me. 'I don't know what it means,' I said, gasping. 'I can't guess. Is it you who have been writing to Captain Llewellyn, or is it Nelly, or who is it? Can there have been any mistake?'

Martha was offended, as indeed she had reason to be. 'There is no mistake,' she said indignantly. 'It is a very strange sort

of thing to say, when any friend, any acquaintance even, would have congratulated me. And you who know us so well! Captain Llewellyn has asked me to marry him—that is all. I thought you might have found out what was coming. But you have no eyes for anybody but Sister. You never think of me.'

'I beg your pardon,' said I, faltering; 'I was so much taken by surprise. I am sure I wish you every happiness, Martha. Nobody can be more anxious for your welfare than I am—' and here I stopped short in my confusion, choked by the words, and not knowing what to say.

'Yes, I am sure of that,' said Martha affectionately, stopping at the gate to give me a kiss. 'I said so to Sister this morning. I said I am sure Mrs. Mulgrave will be pleased. But are you *really* so much surprised? Did you never think this was how it was to be?'

'No,' I said, trembling in spite of myself; 'I never thought of it. I thought indeed—but that makes no difference now.'

'What did you think?' said Martha; and then her private sense of pride and pleasure surmounted everything else. 'Well, you see it is so,' she said, with a beaming smile. 'He kept his own counsel, you see. I should not have thought he was so sly—should you? I dare say he thinks he showed it more than he did; for he says I must have seen how it was from the first day.'

And she stood before me so beaming, so dimpling over with smiles and pleasure, that my heart sank within me. Could it be a mistake, or was it I—ah! how little it mattered for me—was it my poor Nelly who had been deceived?

'And did you?' I said, looking into her face, 'did you see it from the first day?'

'Well, n-no,' said Martha, hesitating; and then she resumed with a laugh, 'That shows you how sly he must have been. I don't think I ever suspected such a thing; but then, to be sure, I never thought much about him, you know.'

A little gleam of comfort came into my heart as she spoke. 'Oh, then,' I said, relieved, 'there is no occasion for congratulations after all.'

'Why is there no occasion for congratulations?' said Martha. 'Of course there is occasion. I wanted Sister to run in and tell you last night, but she wouldn't; and I rather wanted you to tell me what I should say, or, rather, how I should say it; but I managed it after all by myself. I suppose one always can if one tries. It comes by nature, people say.' And Martha laughed again, and blushed, and cast a proud glance on the letter she held in her hand.

'But if you never had thought of him yesterday,' said I, 'you can't have accepted him to-day.'

'Why not?' said Martha, with a toss of her pretty head—and she was pretty, especially in that moment of excitement. I could not refuse to see it. It was a mere piece of pink-and-white prettiness, instead of my little nut-brown maid, with her soft eyes, and her bright varied gleams of feeling and intelligence. But then you can never calculate on what a man may think in respect to a girl. Men are such fools; I mean where women are concerned.

'Why not?' said Martha, with a laugh. 'I don't mean I am

frantically in love with him, you know. How could I be, when I never knew he cared for me? But I always said he was very nice; and then it is so suitable. And I don't care for anybody else. It would be very foolish of me to refuse him without any reason. Of course,' said Martha, looking down upon her letter, 'I shall think of him very differently now.'

What could I say? I was at my wits' end. I walked on by her side to the post-office in a maze of confusion and doubt. I could have snatched the letter out of her hand, and torn it into a hundred pieces; but that would have done little good; and how could I tell if it was a mistake after all? He might have sought Nelly for her sister's sake. He might have been such a fool, such a dolt, as to prefer Martha. All this time he might but have been making his advances to her covertly—under shield as it were of the gay bright creature who was too young and too simple-hearted to understand such devices. Oh, my little nut-brown maid! no wonder her eyes were so large and shadowy, her pretty cheeks so colourless! I could have cried with vexation and despair as I went along step for step with the other on the quiet country road. Though she was so far from being bright, Martha at last was struck by my silence. It took her a considerable time to find it out, for naturally her own thoughts were many, and her mind was fully pre-occupied; but she did perceive it at last.

'I don't think you seem to like it, Mrs. Mulgrave,' she said; 'not so much as I thought you would. You were the very first person I thought of; I was coming to tell you when I met you.

And I thought you would sympathize with me and be so pleased to hear–'

'My dear,' said I, 'I am pleased to hear—anything that is for your happiness; but then I am so much surprised. It was not what I looked for. And then, good heavens! if it should turn out to be some mistake–'

'Mrs. Mulgrave,' said Martha angrily, 'I don't know what you can mean. This is the second time you have talked of a mistake. What mistake could there be? I suppose Captain Llewellyn knows what he is doing: unless you want to be unkind and cross. And what have I done that you should be so disagreeable to me?'

'Oh, my dear child!' I cried in despair, 'I don't know what I mean; I thought once—there was Major Frost, you know–'

'Oh, is it that?' said Martha, restored to perfect good-humour; 'poor Major Frost! But of course if he did not choose to come forward in time, he could not expect me to wait for him. You may make your mind quite easy if that is all.'

'And then,' I said, taking a little courage, 'Captain Llewellyn paid Nelly a good deal of attention. He might have thought–'

'Yes,' said Martha, 'to be sure; and I never once suspected that he meant it for me all the time.'

I ask anybody who is competent to judge, could I have said any more? I walked to the post-office with her, and I saw the letter put in. And an hour afterwards I saw the mail-cart rattling past with the bags, and knew it had set out to its destination. He would get it next morning, and the two lives would be bound for

ever and ever. The wrong two?—or was it only we, Nelly and I, who had made the mistake? Had it been Martha he sought all the time?

CHAPTER II

The news soon became known to everybody on the Green, and great surprise was excited by it. Everybody, I think, spoke to me on the subject. They said, 'If it had been the other sister!' Even Lady Denzil went so far as to say this, when, after having called at the Admiral's to offer her congratulations, she came in to see me. 'I do not pretend that I like the marriage,' she said, with a little solemnity. 'There were claims upon him nearer home. It is not every man that is at liberty to choose for himself; but if it had been the little one I could have understood it.' I hope nobody spoke like this to Nelly; she kept up a great deal too well to satisfy me. She was in the very centre of all the flutter that such an event makes in a small society like ours, and she knew people were watching her; but she never betrayed herself. She had lost her colour somehow—everybody remarked that; and the proud little girl got up a succession of maladies, and said she had influenza and indigestion, and I know not what, that nobody might suspect any other cause. Sometimes I caught her for one instant off her guard, but it was a thing that happened very rarely. Two or three times I met her going off by herself for a long walk, and she would not have my company when I offered to go with her. 'I walk so fast,' she said, 'and then it is too far for you.' Once I even saw her in the spot to which all our walks tended—the Dingle, which was our favourite haunt. It was a glorious autumn, and

the fine weather lasted long—much longer than usual. Up to the middle of November there were still masses of gorgeous foliage on the trees, and the sky was as blue—not as Italy, for Italy is soft and languorous and melting—but as an English sky without clouds, full of sunshine, yet clear, with a premonitory touch of frost, can be. The trees in the Dingle are no common trees; they are giant beeches, big-boled, heavily-clothed giants, that redden and crisp and hold their own until the latest moment; and that mount up upon heights, and descend into hollows, and open up here and there into gleams of the fair plain around, growing misty in the distance as if it were sea. The great point in the landscape is a royal castle, the noblest dwelling-place I ever saw. We who live so near are learned in the different points of view; we know where to catch it shining like a fairy stronghold in the white hazy country, or stretching out in gray profile upon its height, or setting itself—here the great donjon, there a flanking tower—in frames of leafy branches. I had left my little carriage and my stout old pony on the road, and had wandered up alone to have my last peep before winter set in, when suddenly I saw Nelly before me. She was walking up and down on the soft yielding mossy grass, carpeted with beech-mast and pine-needles; sometimes stopping to gaze blankly at the view—at the great plain whitening off to the horizon, and the castle rising in the midst. I knew what the view was, but I saw also that she did not see it. Her face was all drawn together, small and shrunken up. There were deep shadowy lines round her eyes; and as for the eyes themselves, it

was them and not Nelly that I saw. They were dilated, almost exaggerated, unlike anything I ever saw before. She had come out here to be alone, poor child! I crept away as best I could through the brown crackling ferns. If she heard anything probably she thought it was some woodland creature that could not spy upon her. But I don't believe she heard anything, nor saw anything; and I was no spy upon her, dear heart!

The nearest we ever came to conversation on the subject was once when I was telling her about a girl I once knew, whose story had been a very sad one. She had pledged her heart and her life to a foolish young fellow, who was very fond of her, and then was very fond of somebody else; and would have been fond of her again, periodically, to any number of times. She had borne it as long as she could, and then she had broken down; and it had been a relief to her, poor girl, to come and cry her heart out to me.

'It has never been my way, Nelly,' I said, 'but it seems to ease the heart when it can speak. I don't think that I could have spoken to any one, had it been me.'

'And as for me,' cried Nelly, 'if I should ever be like that—and if any one, even you, were so much as to look at me as if you knew, I think I should die!'

This was before the lamp was lighted; and in the dark, I think she put up a hand to wipe off something from her eyelash. But you may be sure I took care not to look. I tried to put all speculation out of my eyes whenever I looked at her afterwards. My poor Nelly! in the very extravagance of her pride was

there not an appeal, and piteous throwing of herself upon my forbearance? I thought there was, and it went to my heart.

The next thing, of course, was that Llewellyn announced himself as coming to visit his betrothed. He was to come at Christmas, not being able to leave his ship before. And then it was to be settled when the marriage should take place. I confess that I listened to all this with a very bad grace. Any reference to the marriage put me out of temper. He wrote to her regularly and very often, and Martha used to read his letters complacently before us all, and communicate little bits out of them, and spend half her mornings writing her replies. She was not a ready writer, and it really was hard work to her, and improved her education —at least in the mechanical matters of writing and spelling. But I wonder what sort of rubbish it was she wrote to him, and what he thought of it. Was it possible he could suppose it was my Nelly who wrote all those commonplaces, or was the mistake on my part, not on his? As time went on, I came to think, more and more, that the latter was the case. We had been deceived, Nelly and I. And Martha and Llewellyn were two lovers worthy of each other. I fear I was not very charitable to him in my thoughts.

But I could not help being very nervous the day of his arrival. It was a bleak wintry day, Christmas Eve, but not what people call Christmas weather. It rarely is Christmas weather at Christmas. The sky hung low and leaden over our bare trees, and of course there were no cricketers now on the Green, nor sound of croquet balls, to enliven the stillness. I could not rest at home. We had

not been informed what train Captain Llewellyn was to come by, and my mind was in such a disturbed state, that I kept coming and going, all day long, on one errand or another, lingering about the road. I don't myself know what I meant by it; nor could I have explained it to anybody. Sometimes I thought, if I should meet him first, I would speak and make sure. Sometimes I fancied that I could read in his face, at the first look, what it all meant. But, anyhow, I did not meet him. I thought all the trains were in when I went to the Admiral's in the afternoon, at five o'clock —that is, all the trains that could arrive before dinner, for we were two miles from the station. Martha and her father were in the drawing-room when I entered. There was a bright fire, but the candles were not lighted; I suppose, out of reluctance to shut up the house, and close all the windows, before the visitor came. Martha was sitting by the fire looking very gay and bright, and a little excited. She told me Nelly had been all day in the church, helping with the decorations, and that she was to stay at the rectory to dinner, as there was a Christmas-tree for the school-children to be got ready. 'I dare say she thought we should not want her this first evening,' Martha said with a little laugh; and such was the bitterness and unreasonableness of my heart that I was speechless with exasperation; which was nonsense, for of course she had a right to the society of her betrothed. While we were sitting thus over the fire, all at once there came a sound of wheels, and the dog-cart from the little inn at Dinglefield Station came rattling up. Martha gave a little cry, and ran to the drawing-

room door. I know I should have gone away, but I did not. I stood behind in the ruddy gloom, and saw her rush into Llewellyn's arms. And he kissed her. And the next moment they were back in the room beside us, she chatting about his journey, and looking up in his face, and showing her satisfaction and delight, as it was quite natural she should do. It seemed to me that he did not make very much reply; but the room was dark, and his arrival was sudden, and there was a certain confusion about everything. The Admiral came forward, and shook hands with him, and so did I; and instead of looking as if he wished us a hundred miles off, Llewellyn kept peering into the corners, as if he wanted another greeting. Then he came to the fire, and stood before it, making the room all the darker with his shadow; and after we had all asked him if he had felt the cold on his journey, there did not seem very much to say. I don't know how the others felt, but I know my heart began to beat wildly. Martha was in an unnatural state of excitement. She drew a great comfortable easy-chair to the fire for him. 'Dear Ellis, sit down,' she said, laying her hand softly on his arm. The touch seemed to wake him up out of a kind of reverie. He took her hand, and held it for a moment, and then let it fall.

'You are far too kind,' he said, 'to take so much trouble for me. A thousand thanks. Where is—your sister? She knew I was to come by this train.'

'No, I don't think Sister knew,' said Martha; 'that was my little secret. I would not tell them what train you were coming by.

She is helping with the church decorations. She will see you to-morrow, you know. I wish they would bring the tea: papa, will you ring?—Oh, papa has gone away. Wait a minute, Ellis dear, and I will run and make them bring it immediately. It will warm you better than anything else. I sha'n't be a moment gone.'

The moment she had left us poor Llewellyn turned to me. Notwithstanding the ruddy firelight, I could see he was quite haggard with the awful suspicion that must have flashed upon him. 'Mrs. Mulgrave!' he cried hurriedly, holding out his hands, 'for God's sake, tell me, what does this mean?'

'It means that you have come to see your betrothed, Captain Llewellyn,' said I; 'she has just gone out of the room. You made your choice, and I hope you did not expect to have both the sisters. Martha stayed to receive you, as was right and natural. You could not expect the same from Nelly. She thought neither of you would want a third to-night.'

I was so angry that I said all this in a breath. I know I ought to be ashamed of myself, but I did it; I don't think however that he heard half. He covered his face with his hands and gave a groan, which seemed to me to echo all through the house; and I had to add on to what I was saying, 'Oh, for heaven's sake, restrain yourself,' I cried, without even taking breath; 'now it is too late!'

And then Martha came in, excited and joyous, half dancing with high spirits. I could have groaned too and hid my face from the light as he did, poor fellow! but she went up to him and drew down his hands playfully and said, 'I am here, Ellis, you needn't

cover your eyes.' He did not answer her with a compliment or a caress, as perhaps she expected; and Martha looked at me where I was standing by the side of the fire. I knew she thought I was the restraining influence that closed his mouth and subdued his joy—and what could I do?—I went away: I could be of no use to him, poor boy! He must face it now as best he could. I went away, and as soon as I got safely into my own house sat down and cried. Not that crying would do any good; but when everything is going wrong, and everybody is on the way to ruin and you see how it is, and know how to mend it, and yet cannot, dare not, put forth a hand, what can any one do but sit down and cry?

But I could not rest in my quiet, comfortable, lonely house, and know that those poor young hearts were being wrung, and keep still and take no notice. I had my cup of tea, and I put on my warm cloak and hood and went across the Green, though it was wet and slippery, to the school-room, where I knew Nelly would be. She was in the midst of a heap of toys and paper-flags and little tapers, dressing up the Christmas-tree. There were three or four girls altogether, and Nelly was the busiest of all. Her little hands were pricked and scratched with the points of the holly and the sharp needles of the little fir-tree on which she was working. Poor child! I wish it had been her hands only that were wounded. The others had gloves on, but Nelly had taken hers off, either because she found the pain of the pricks good for her, or because of some emblematical meaning in it. 'I can't work in gloves,' she said carelessly, 'and it doesn't hurt so much when you are used to

it.' When I saw her I could not but think of the pictures of Indians tied to the stake, with arrows flying at them from all quarters. I am aware St. Sebastian was killed in the same way—but I did not think of him.

'I wish you would come with me, Nelly,' I said; 'you know Christmas Eve is never very merry to me. There is no dinner, but you shall have something with your tea.'

'I am going to the rectory,' said Nelly. She did not venture to look at me, and she spoke very quick, with a kind of catch in her breath. 'I promised—and there is a great deal to do yet. When Christmas is not merry it is best to try and forget it is Christmas. If I were to go with you, you would talk to me, and that would make you feel everything the more.'

'I would not talk—you may trust me, Nelly,' I said eagerly. In my excitement I was for one minute off my guard.

She gave me one look and then turned away, and began arranging the flags and pricking her poor little soft fingers. 'Talking does not matter to me,' she said in her careless way. Her pride was something that filled me with consternation. She would not yield, not if she had been cut in little pieces. Her heart was being torn out of her very breast, and she was ready to look her executioners in the face and cheer them on.

I don't know how they all got through that evening. Nelly, I know, went home late and went to her own room at once, as being tired. It was poor Llewellyn that was the most to be pitied. I could not get him out of my mind. I sat and thought and thought

over it till I could scarcely rest. Would he have the courage to emancipate himself and tell the truth? Or would the dreadful coil of circumstances in which he had got involved overcome him and subdue his spirit? I asked myself this question till it made me sick and faint. How was he to turn upon the girl who was hanging on him so proud and pleased and confident, and say that he had never cared for her and never sought her? There are men who would have the nerve to do that; but my poor simple, tender-hearted sailor—who would not hurt a fly, and who had no warning nor preparation for the fate that was coming on him—I could not hope that he would be so brave.

I saw by my first glance next morning at church that he had not been brave. He was seated by Martha's side, looking pale and haggard and stern; such a contrast to her lively and demonstrative happiness. Nelly was at the other end of the pew under her father's shadow. I don't know what she had done to herself—either it was excitement, or in her pride she had had recourse to artificial aids. She had recovered her colour as if by a miracle. I am afraid that I did not pay so much attention to the service as I ought to have done. My whole thoughts were bent upon the Admiral's seat, where there were two people quite serene and comfortable, and two in the depths of misery and despair. There were moments when I felt as if I could have got up in church and protested against it in the sight of God. One feels as if one could do that: but one keeps still and does nothing all the same.

In the afternoon Llewellyn came to see me. He would have

done it anyhow, I feel sure, for he had a good heart. But there was a stronger reason still that Christmas Day. He did not say much to me when he came. He walked about my drawing-room and looked at all the ornaments on the tables, and opened the books, and examined my Christmas presents. Then he came and sat down beside me before the fire. He tried to talk, and then he broke off and leant his face between his hands. It was again a gray, dark, sunless day; and it was all the darker in my room because of the verandah over the windows, which makes it so pleasant in summer. I could see his profile darkly before me as he made an attempt at conversation, not looking at me, but staring into the fire; and then, all at once, his shoulders went up, and his face disappeared in the shadow of his hands. He stared into the fire still, under that shelter; but he felt himself safe from my inspection, poor fellow!

'I ought to beg your pardon,' he said, suddenly, concentrating all his attention upon the glowing embers, 'for speaking as I did —last night–'

'There was nothing to pardon,' said I. And then we came to an embarrassed pause, for I did not know which was best—to speak, or to be silent.

'I know I was very abrupt,' he said, 'I was rude. I hope you will forgive me. It was the surprise.' And then he gave vent to something between a cry and a groan. 'What is to become of us all, good God!' he muttered. It was all I could do to hear him, and the exclamation did not sound to me profane.

'Captain Llewellyn,' I said, 'I don't know whether I ought to say anything, or whether I should hold my tongue. I understand it all; and I feel for you with all my heart.'

'It doesn't matter,' he said; 'it doesn't matter. Feeling is of no use. But there is one thing you could tell me. She—you know—I can't call her by any name—I don't seem to know her name—Just tell me one thing, and I'll try and bear it. Did she mind? Does she think me–? Good heavens! what does it matter what any one thinks? If you are sure it did not hurt her, I—don't mind.'

'N—no,' said I; but I don't think he got any comfort from my tone. 'You may be sure it will not hurt her,' I went on, summoning up all my pride. 'She is not the sort of girl to let it hurt her.' I spoke indignantly, for I did not know what was coming. He seized my hand, poor boy, and wrung it till I could have screamed; and then he broke down, as a man does when he has come to the last point of wretchedness: two or three hoarse sobs burst from him. 'God bless her!' he cried.

I was wound up to such a pitch that I could not sit still. I got up and grasped his shoulder. In my excitement I did not know what I was doing.

'Are you going to bear it?' I said. 'Do you mean to let it go on? It is a lie; and are you going to set it up for the truth? Oh, Captain Llewellyn! is it possible that you mean to let it go on?'

Then he gave me one sorrowful look, and shook his head. 'I have accepted it,' he said. 'It is too late. You said so last night.'

I knew I had said so; but things somehow looked different

now. 'I would speak to Martha herself,' said I. And I saw he shuddered at her name. 'I would speak to her father. The Admiral is sensible and kind. He will know what to do.'

'He will think I mean to insult them,' said Llewellyn, shaking his head. 'I have done harm enough. How was I to know? But never mind—never mind. It is my own doing, and I must bear it.' Then he rose up suddenly, and turned to me with a wan kind of smile. 'I cannot afford to indulge myself with talk,' he said. 'Good-bye, and thanks. I don't feel as if I cared much now what happened. The only thing is, I can't stay here.'

'But you must stay a week—you must stay over Christmas,' I cried, as he stood holding my hand.

'Yes,' he said with a sigh. 'I must get through to-night. If you'd keep her out of the way, Mrs. Mulgrave, it would be the kindest thing you could do. I can't look at her. It kills me. But I'll be summoned by telegram to-morrow,' he added, with a kind of desperate satisfaction. 'I wrote this morning.' And then he shook hands with me hurriedly, and went away.

I had very little trouble to keep Nelly—poor Nelly!—out of his way. She made me go up-stairs with her after dinner (I always dined there on Christmas) to show me the presents she had got, and the things she had prepared for her pensioners in the village. We made a great pet of the village, we people who lived on the Green, and, I fear, rather spoiled it. There were things for the babies, and things for the old women, which were to be bestowed next day when they all came to the school-room

for the Christmas-tree. She never mentioned Llewellyn to me, nor Martha, nor referred to the domestic event which, in other circumstances, would have occupied her mind above all. I almost wonder it did not occur to her that to speak of, and show an interest in, her sister's engagement was quite a necessary part of her own self-defence. Either it was too much, and she could not, or it did not enter into her mind. She never took any notice of it, at least to me. She never so much as mentioned his name. They never looked at each other, nor addressed each other, though I could see that every look and movement of one was visible to the other. Nelly kept me up-stairs until it was time for me to go home. She came running out with me, with her red cloak round her, when the Admiral marched to the gate to see me home, as he made a rule of doing. She stood at the gate, in the foggy, wintry darkness, to wait for him until he came back from my door. And I waited on my own threshold, and saw them going back—Nelly, poor child, clinging fast to her father's arm. My heart ached; and yet not so much even for her as for the other. What was he doing indoors, left alone with the girl he was engaged to, and did not love?

Next morning, to the astonishment and dismay of everybody but myself, Captain Llewellyn was summoned back to his ship by telegraph. Martha was more excited about it than I should have supposed possible. It was so hard upon poor dear Ellis, she said, before they had been able to arrange anything, or even to talk of anything. She had not the slightest doubt of him. His wretched

looks, and his hesitation and coldness, had taught nothing to Martha. If she was perhaps disappointed at first by his want of ardour, the disappointment had soon passed. It was his way; he was not the sort of man to make a fuss. By this means she quite accounted for it to herself. For my own part, I cannot say that I was satisfied with his conduct. If he had put a stop to it boldly—if he had said at once it was all a mistake—then, whatever had come of it, I could have supported and sympathized with him; but it made an end of Captain Llewellyn, as a man, in my estimation, when he thus ran away. I was vexed, and I was sorry; and yet I cannot say I was surprised.

He wrote afterwards to say it was important business, and that he had no hope of being able to come back. And then he wrote that he had been transferred to another ship just put into commission, and had to sail at once. He could not even come to wish his betrothed good-bye. He assured her it could not be for long, as their orders were only for the Mediterranean; but it was a curious reversal of all their former ideas. 'He must retire,' Martha said, when she had told me this news with tears. 'The idea of a man with a good property of his own being ordered about like that! Papa says things have changed since his days; he never heard of anything so arbitrary. After all he said about our marriage taking place first, to think that he should have to go away now, without a moment to say good-bye!'

And she cried and dried her eyes, while I sat by and felt myself a conspirator, and was very uncomfortable. Nelly was present

too. She sat working in the window, with her head turned away from us, and took no part in the conversation. Perhaps it was a relief; perhaps—and this was what she herself thought—it would have been better to have got it over at once. Anyhow, at this present juncture, she sat apart, and took no apparent notice of what we said.

'And Nelly never says a word,' sobbed Martha. 'She has no sympathy. I think she hates poor dear Ellis. She scarcely looked at him when he was here. And she won't say she is sorry now.'

'When everybody is sorry what does it matter if I say it or not?' said Nelly, casting one rapid glance from her work. She never was so fond of her work before. Now she had become all at once a model girl: she never was idle for a moment; one kind of occupation or another was constantly in her hands. She sat at her knitting, while Martha, disappointed and vexed, cried and folded up her letter. I don't know whether an inkling of the truth had come to Nelly's mind. Sometimes I thought so. When the time approached which Llewellyn had indicated as the probable period of his return, she herself proposed that she should go on a visit to her godmother in Devonshire. It was spring then, and she had a cough; and there were very good reasons why she should go. The only one that opposed it was Martha. 'It will look so unkind to dear Ellis,' she said; 'as if you would rather not meet him. At Christmas you were out all the time. And if she dislikes him, Mrs. Mulgrave, she ought to try to get over it. Don't you think so? It is unkind to go away.'

‘She does not dislike him,’ said I. ‘But she wants a change, my dear.’ And so we all said. The Admiral, good man, did not understand it at all. He saw that something was wrong. ‘There is something on the little one’s mind,’ he said to me. ‘I hoped she would have taken you into her confidence. I can’t tell what is wrong with her, for my part.’

‘She wants a change,’ said I. ‘She has never said anything to me.’

It was quite true; she had never said a word to me. I might have betrayed Llewellyn, but I could not betray Nelly. She had kept her own counsel. While the Admiral was talking to me, I cannot describe how strong the temptation was upon me to tell him all the story. But I dared not. It was a thing from which the boldest might have shrunk. And though everybody on the Green had begun to wonder vaguely, and the Admiral himself was a little uneasy, Martha never suspected anything amiss. She cried a little when ‘poor Ellis’ wrote to say his return was again postponed; but it was for his disappointment she cried. Half an hour after she was quite serene and cheerful again, looking forward to the time when he should arrive eventually. ‘For he must come some time, you know; they can’t keep him away for ever,’ she said; until one did not know whether to be impatient with her serenity, or touched by it, and could not make up one’s mind whether it was stupidity or faith.

CHAPTER III

Nelly paid her visit to her godmother, and came back; and spring wore into summer, and the trees were all in full foliage again in the Dingle, and the cricketers had returned to the Green; but still Captain Llewellyn was unaccountably detained. Nelly had come home looking much better than when she went away. His name still disturbed her composure I could see; though I don't suppose a stranger who knew nothing of the circumstances would have found it out. And when Martha threatened us with a visit from him, her sister shrank up into herself; but otherwise Nelly was much improved. She recovered her cheerful ways; she became the soul of all our friendly parties again. I said to myself that I had been a truer prophet than I had the least hope of; and that she was not the sort of girl to let herself be crushed in any such way. But she never spoke to me of her sister's marriage, nor of her sister's betrothed. I mentioned the matter one day when we were alone, cruelly and of set purpose to see what she would say. 'When your sister is married, and when you are married,' I said, 'it will be very dull both for the Admiral and me.'

'I shall never marry,' said Nelly, with a sudden closing up and veiling of all her brightness which was more expressive than words. 'I don't know about Sister; but you need not weave any such visions for me.'

'All girls say so till their time comes,' said I, with an attempt

to be playful; 'but why do you say you don't know about Martha? she must be married before long, of course?'

'I suppose so,' said Nelly, and then she stopped short; she would not add another word; but afterwards, when we were all together, she broke out suddenly—Martha's conversation at this period was very much occupied with her marriage. I suppose it was quite natural. In my young days girls were shy of talking much on that subject, but things are changed now. Martha talked of it continually: of when dear Ellis would come; of his probable desire that the wedding should take place at once; of her determination to have two months at least to prepare her trousseau; of where they should go after the marriage. She discussed everything, without the smallest idea, poor girl, of what was passing in the minds of the listeners. At last, after hearing a great deal of this for a long time, Nelly suddenly burst forth—

'How strange it would be after all, if we were to turn out a couple of old maids,' she cried, 'and never to marry at all. The two old sisters! with chairs on each side of the fire, and great authorities in the village. How droll it would be!—and not so very unlikely after all.'

'Speak for yourself,' cried Martha indignantly. 'It is very unlikely so far as I am concerned. I am as good as married already. As for you, you can do what you please–'

'Yes, I can do what I please,' said Nelly, with a curious ring in her voice; and then she added, 'But I should not wonder if we were both old maids after all.'

'She is very queer,' Martha said to me when her sister had left the room, in an aggrieved tone. 'She does not mean it, of course; but I don't like it, Mrs. Mulgrave. It does not seem lucky. Why should she take it into her head about our being old maids? I am as good as married now.'

'Yes,' I said vaguely. I could not give any assent more cordial. And then she resumed her anticipations. But I saw in a moment what Nelly meant. This was how she thought it was to end. It was a romantic girl's notion, but happily she was too young to think how unlikely it was. No doubt she saw a vision of the two maiden sisters, and of one who would be their devoted friend, but who could never marry either. That was the explanation she had put in her heart upon his abrupt departure and his many delays. He had made a fatal mistake, and its consequences were to last all his life. They were all three, all their lives long, to continue in the same mind. He could never marry either of them; and neither of them, none of the three, were ever to be tempted to marry another. And thus, in a pathetic climax of faithfulness and delicate self-sacrifice, they were to grow old and die. Nelly was no longer miserable when she had framed this ideal in her mind. It seemed to her the most natural solution of the difficulty. The romance, instead of ending in a prosaic marriage, was to last all their lives. And the eldest of them, Llewellyn himself, was but seven-and-twenty! Poor Nelly thought it the most likely thing in the world.

If she had consulted me, I could have told her of something much more likely—something which very soon dawned upon

the minds of most people at Dinglefield Green. It was that a certain regiment had come back to the barracks which were not very far from our neighbourhood. Before Captain Llewellyn made his appearance among us, there had been a Major Frost who had 'paid attention' to Martha; and he did not seem at all disinclined to pay attention to her now that he had come back. Though he was told of her engagement, the information seemed to have very little effect upon him. He came over perpetually, and was always at hand to ride, or walk, or drive, or flirt, as the young ladies felt disposed. Before he had been back a fortnight it seemed to me that Martha had begun to talk less about dear Ellis. By degrees she came the length of confessing that dear Ellis wrote very seldom. I had found out that fact for myself, but she had never made any reference to it before. I watched her with an interest which surpassed every other interest in my life at that moment. I forgot even Nelly, and took no notice of her in comparison. The elder sister absorbed me altogether. By degrees she gave up talking of her marriage, and of her wedding-dress, and where they were to live; and she began to talk of Major Frost. He seemed always to be telling her something which she had to repeat; and he told her very private details, with which she could have nothing to do. He told her that he was much better off than when he was last at the Green. Somebody had died and had left him a great deal of money. He was thinking of leaving the army, and buying a place in our county, if possible. He asked Martha's advice where he should go. 'It is odd that he should tell you all

this,' I said to her one day, when she was re-confiding to me a great many of Major Frost's personal affairs; and though she was not usually very quick of apprehension, something called upon Martha's cheek the shadow of a blush.

'I think it is quite natural,' she said; 'we are such old friends; and then he knows I am engaged. I always thought he was very nice—didn't you? I don't think he will ever marry,' Martha added, with a certain pathos. 'He says he could never have married but one woman; and he can't have her now. He was poor when he was last here you know.'

'And who was the woman he could have married?' said I.

'Oh, of course I did not ask him,' said Martha with modest consciousness. 'Poor fellow! it would have been cruel to ask him. It is hard that he should have got his money just after I– I mean after she was engaged.'

'It is hard that money should always be at the bottom of everything,' said I. And though it was the wish nearest to my heart that Martha should forget and give up Llewellyn, still I was angry with her for what she said. But that made no difference. She was not bright enough to know that her faith was wavering. She went on walking and talking with Major Frost, and boring us all with him and his confidences, till I, for one, was sick of his very name. But she meant no treachery; she never even thought of deserting her betrothed. Had any accident happened to bring him uppermost, she would have gone back to dear Ellis all the same. She was not faithless nor fickle, nor anything that was

wicked: she was chiefly stupid, or, rather, I stolid. And to think the two were sisters! The Admiral was not very quick-sighted, but evidently he had begun to notice how things were going. He came to me one afternoon to consult me when both the girls were out. I suppose they were at croquet somewhere. We elders found that afternoon hour, when they were busy with the balls and mallets, a very handy time for consulting about anything which they were not intended to know.

'I think I ought to write to Llewellyn,' he said. 'Things are in a very unsatisfactory state. I am not satisfied that he was obliged to go away as he said. I think he might have come to see her had he tried. I have been consulting the little one about it, and she thinks with me.'

'What does she think?' I asked with breathless interest, to the Admiral's surprise.

'She thinks with me that things are in an unsatisfactory state,' he said calmly; 'that it would be far better to have it settled and over, one way or another. She is a very sensible little woman. I was just about to write to Llewellyn, but I thought it best to ask you first what your opinion was.'

Should I speak and tell him all? Had I any right to tell him? The thought passed through my mind quick as lightning. I made a longer pause than I ought to have done; and then all I could find to say was:

'I think I should let things take their course if I were you.'

'What does that mean?' said the Admiral quickly. 'Take their

course! I think it is my duty to write to him and let things be settled out of hand.'

It was with this intention he left me. But he did not write, for the very next morning there came a letter from Llewellyn, not to Martha, but to her father, telling him that he was coming home. The ship had been paid off quite unexpectedly I heard afterwards. And I suppose that unless he had been courageous enough to give the true explanation of his conduct he had no resource but to come back. It was a curious, abrupt sort of letter. The young man's conscience, I think, had pricked him for his cowardice in running away; and either he had wound himself up to the point of carrying out his engagement in desperation, or else he was coming to tell his story and ask for his release. I heard of it immediately from the Admiral himself, who was evidently not quite at ease in his mind on the subject. And a short time afterwards Martha came in, dragging her sister with her, full of the news.

'I could scarcely get her to come,' Martha said. 'I can't think what she always wants running after those village people. And when we have just got the news that Ellis is coming home!'

'Yes, I heard,' said I. 'I suppose I ought to congratulate you. Do you expect him soon? Does he say anything about–?'

'Oh, his letter was to papa,' said Martha, interrupting my very hesitating and embarrassed speech; for my eyes were on Nelly, and I saw in a moment that her whole expression had changed. 'He could not be expected to say anything particular to papa, but

I suppose it must be very soon. I don't think he will want to wait now he is free.'

'I shall be very glad when it is all over,' said Nelly, to my great surprise. It was the first time I had heard her make any comment on the subject. 'It will make so much fuss and worry. It is very entertaining to them, I suppose, but it is rather tiresome to us. Mrs. Mulgrave, I am going to see Molly Jackson; I can hear all about the *trousseau* at home, you know.'

'Nelly!' said I, as I kissed her; and I could not restrain a warning look. She flushed up, poor child, to her hair, but turned away with a sick impatience that went to my heart.

'If you had the worry of it night and day as I shall have!' she said under her breath, with an impatient sigh. And then she went away.

I knew all that was in her heart as well as if she had told me. She had lost her temper and patience as well as her peace of mind. It is hard to keep serene under a repeated pressure. She did it the first time, but she was not equal to it the second. She had no excuse to go away now. She had to look forward to everything, and hear it all discussed, and go through it in anticipation. She had to receive him as his future sister; to be the witness of everything, always on the spot; a part of the bridal pageant, the first and closest spectator. And it was very hard to bear. As for Martha, she sat serene in a chair which she had herself worked for me, turning her fair countenance to the light. She saw nothing strange in Nelly's temper, nor in anything that happened to her.

She sat waiting till I had taken my seat again, quite ready to go into the question of the *trousseau*. The sight of her placidity made me desperate. Suddenly there came before me the haggard looks of poor Llewellyn, and the pale exasperation and heart-sickness of my bright little Nelly's face. And then I looked at Martha, who was sitting, serene and cheerful, just in the same spot and the same attitude in which, a few days before, she had told me of Major Frost. She had left off Major Frost now and come back to her trousseau. What did it matter to her which of them it was? As for giving her pain or humiliating her, how much or how long would she feel it? I became desperate. I fastened the door when I closed it after Nelly that nobody might interrupt us, and then I came and sat down opposite to my victim. Martha was utterly unconscious still. It never occurred to her to notice how people were looking, nor to guess what was in anybody's mind.

'You are quite pleased,' said I, making my first assault very gently, 'that Captain Llewellyn is coming home?'

'Pleased!' said Martha. 'Of course I am pleased. What odd people you all are! Anybody might see that it is pleasanter to be settled and know what one is doing. I wish you would come up to town with me some day, Mrs. Mulgrave, and help me with my things.'

'My dear,' said I, 'in the first place, there is something more important than your things; there is Major Frost. What do you mean to do with him?'

'I—with him?' said Martha, opening her eyes. 'He always

knew I was engaged. Of course I am very sorry for him; but if he did not choose to come forward in time, he could not expect that one was to wait.'

'And is that how you mean to leave him,' said I severely, 'after all the encouragement you have given him? Every day, for a month past, I have expected to hear you say that you had made a mistake about Captain Llewellyn, and that it was the Major you liked best.'

'Oh, fancy *me* doing such a thing!' cried Martha, really roused, 'after being engaged to Ellis a whole year. If he had come forward at the proper time perhaps– But to make a change when everything was settled! You never could have believed it of *me*!'

'If you like the other better, it is never too late to make a change,' said I, carried away by my motive, which was good, and justified a little stretch of ethics. 'You will be doing a dreadful injury to poor Captain Llewellyn if you marry him and like another man best.'

Martha looked at me with a little simper of self-satisfaction. 'I think I know my duty,' she said. 'I am engaged. I don't see that anything else is of any consequence. Of course the gentleman I am engaged to is the one I shall like best.'

'Do you mean that you are engaged to him because you like him best?' said I. 'Martha, take care. You may be preparing great bitterness for yourself. I have no motive but your good.' This was not true, but still it is a thing that everybody says; and I was so much excited that I had to stop to take breath. 'You may

never have it in your power to make a choice again,' I said with solemnity. 'You ought to pause and think seriously which of the two you love. You cannot love them both. It is the most serious question you will ever have to settle in your life.'

Martha looked at me with a calm surprise which drove me wild. 'Dear Mrs. Mulgrave,' she said, 'I don't know what you mean. I am engaged to Ellis—and Major Frost has never proposed even. He may have been only flirting, for anything I can tell; and how foolish it would be to give up the one without any real hold on the other! but of course it is nonsense altogether. Why, Ellis is coming back on purpose; and as Major Frost did not come forward in time, I don't see how he can complain.'

All this she said with the most perfect placidity, sitting opposite the window, lifting her serene countenance to the light. It was a practical concern to Martha. It did not so much matter which it was; but to interfere with a thing fully arranged and settled, because of any mere question of liking! I was not by a very long way so cool as she was. Everything seemed to me to depend upon this last throw, and I felt myself suddenly bold to put it to the touch. It was not my business, to be sure; but to think of those two young creatures torn asunder and made miserable! It was not even Nelly I was thinking of. Nelly would be free; she was young; she would not have her heartbreak always kept before her, and time would heal her wounds. But poor Llewellyn was bound and fettered. He could not escape nor forget. It was for him I made my last attempt.

'Martha, I have something still more serious to say to you,' I said. 'Do you remember, when you told me of Captain Llewellyn's proposal first, I asked you if it was not a mistake?'

'Yes, I remember very well,' said Martha. 'It was just like you. I never knew any one who asked such odd questions. I should have been angry had it been any one but you.'

'Perhaps you will be angry now,' I said. 'I know you will be vexed, but I can't help it. Oh, my dear, you must listen to me! It is not only your happiness that is concerned, but that of others. Martha, I have every reason to think that it was a mistake. Don't smile; I am in earnest. It was a mistake. Can't you see yourself how little heart he puts into it? Martha, my dear, it is no slight to you. You told me you had never thought of him before he wrote to you. And it was not you he meant to write to. What can I say to convince you? It is true; it is not merely my idea. It was all a mistake.'

'Mrs. Mulgrave,' said Martha, a little moved out of her composure, 'I am not angry. I might be; but I am sure you don't mean it. It is one of the fancies you take into your head. How could it be a mistake? It was me he wrote to, not anybody else. Of course I was not fond of him before; but when a man asks you to marry him, how is it possible there can be any mistake?'

'Oh, Martha,' I said, wringing my hands, 'let me tell you all; only hear me, and don't be vexed. Did you never notice all that summer how he followed Nelly about? Try and remember. He was always by her side; wherever we went those two were

together. Ask anybody; ask Lady Denzil; ask your father. Oh, my dear child, I don't want to hurt your feelings! I want to save you from something you will be very sorry for. I want you to be happy. Can't you see what I mean without any more explanations from me?'

Martha had, notwithstanding her composure, grown pale. Her placid looks had changed a little. 'I see it is something about Sister,' she said. 'Because you like her best, you think everybody else must like her best too. I wonder why it is that you are so unkind to me!'

As she spoke she cried a little, and turned her shoulder towards me, instead of her face.

'Not unkind,' I said, 'oh, not unkind; I am speaking only because I love you all.'

'You have never loved *me*,' said Martha, weeping freely; 'never, though I have been so fond of you. And now you want to make me ridiculous and miserable. How can I tell what you mean? What has Sister to do with it? Ellis was civil to her for—for my sake. It was me he proposed to. How can I tell what you are all plotting in your hearts? When people write letters to me, and ask me to marry them, am I not to believe what they say?'

'When he wrote, he thought Nelly was the eldest,' I said. 'You know what I have always told you about your names. He wrote to her, and it came to you. Martha, believe me, it is not one of my fancies; it is true.'

'How do you know it is true?' she cried, with a natural outburst

of anger and indignation. 'How do you dare to come and say all this now? Insulting Ellis, and Sister, and me! Oh, I wish I had never known you! I wish I had never, never come into this house! I wish–'

Her voice died away in a storm of sobs and tears. She cried like a child—as a baby cries, violently, with temper, and not with grief. She was not capable of Nelly's suppressed passion and misery; neither did the blow strike deep enough for that; and she had no pride to restrain her. She cried noisily, turning her shoulder to me, making her eyes red and her cheeks blurred. When I got up and went to her, she repulsed me; I had nothing to do but sit down again, and wait till the passion had worn itself out. And there she sat sobbing, crushing her pretty hat, and disfiguring her pretty face, with the bright light falling upon her, and revealing every heave of her shoulders. By degrees the paroxysm subsided; she dried her eyes, poor child, and put up her hair, which had got into disorder, with hasty and agitated hands. Then she turned her flushed, tear-stained face upon me. It was almost prettier than usual in this childish passion.

'I don't believe you!' she cried. 'I don't believe it one bit! You only want to vex me. Oh, I wish I had never known you. I wish I might never see you again—you, and—all the rest! I wish I were dead! But I shall tell papa, Mrs. Mulgrave, and I know what he will think of you.'

'Martha, I am very sorry–' I began, but Martha had rushed to the door.

'I don't want to hear any more!' she said. 'I know everything you can say. You are fond of Sister, and want her to have everything. And you always hated me!'

With these words she rushed out, shutting not only the door of the room behind her in her wrath, but the door of the house, which stood always open. She left me, I avow, in a state of very great agitation. I had not expected her to take it in this way. And it had been a great strain upon my nerves to speak at all. I trembled all over, and as soon as she was gone I cried too, from mere nervousness and agitation, not to speak of the terrible thought that weighed on my mind—had I done harm or good? What would the others say if they knew? Would they bless or curse me? Had I interfered out of season? Had I been officious? Heaven knows! The result only could show.

Most people know what a strange feeling it is when one has thus estranged, or parted in anger from, a daily and intimate companion; how one sits in a vague fever of excitement, thinking it over—wondering what else one could have said; wondering if the offended friend will come or send, or give any sign of reconciliation; wondering what one ought to do. I was so shaken by it altogether that I was good for nothing but lying down on the sofa. When my maid came to look for me, she was utterly dismayed by my appearance. 'Them young ladies are too much for you, ma'am,' she said indignantly. 'It's as bad as daughters of your own.' I think that little speech was the last touch that was wanted to make me break down. As bad as daughters of my own!

but not as good; very different. When I thought how those girls would cling round their father, it was more than I could bear. Not that I envied him. But I was ready to do more for them than he was; to risk their very love in order to serve them; and how different was their affection for me!

All day long I stayed indoors, recovering slowly, but feeling very miserable. Nobody came near me. The girls, who were generally flitting out and in twenty times in a day, never appeared again. The very door which Martha shut in her passion remained closed all day. When it came to be evening, I could bear it no longer; I could not let the sun go down upon such a quarrel; I was so lonely I could not afford to be proud. I drew my shawl round me, though I was still trembling, and went softly in at the Admiral's gate. It was dusk, and everything was very sweet. It had been a lovely autumn day, very warm for the season, and the twilight lingered as if it were loth to make an end. I thought the girls would probably be in the drawing-room by themselves, and that I might invent some excuse for sending Nelly away, and try to make my peace with her sister. I did not love Martha as I loved Nelly, but I was fond of her all the same, as one is fond of a girl one has seen grow up, and watched over from day to day; and I could not bear that she should be estranged from me. When I went in however Nelly was all alone. She was sitting in a low chair by the fire, for they always had a fire earlier than other people. She was sitting over it with her face resting in her hands, almost crouching towards the friendly blaze. And yet it was a

warm evening, very warm for the time of the year. She started when she heard my step, and turned round and for the moment I saw that I was not welcome to Nelly either. Her thoughts had been better company: or was it possible that Martha could have told her? I did not think however that this could be the case, when she drew forward my favourite chair for me, and we began to talk. Nelly had not passed through any crisis such as that which Martha and I had made for ourselves. She told me her sister had a headache, and had been lying down before dinner, but that now she had gone out for a little air.

'Only in the garden,' Nelly said. And then she added, 'Major Frost is here. He is with her—and I don't think he ought to come so often—now–'

'Major Frost!' I said, and my heart began to beat; I don't know what I feared or hoped, for at this moment the Admiral came in from the dining-room, and joined us, and we got into ordinary conversation. What a strange thing ordinary conversation is! We sat in the dark, with only the firelight making rosy gleams about the room, and wavering in the great mirror over the mantelpiece, where we were all dimly reflected—and talked about every sort of indifferent subject. But I wonder if Nelly was thinking of what she was saying? or if her heart was away, like mine, hovering over the heads of these two in the garden, or with poor Llewellyn, who was creeping home an unwilling bridegroom? Even the Admiral, I believe, had something on his mind different from all our chit-chat. For my own part I sat well back in my corner, with my heart

thumping so against my breast that it affected my breathing. I had to speak in gasps, making up the shortest sentences I could think of. And we talked about public affairs, and what was likely to be the result of the new measures; and the Admiral, who was a man of the old school, shook his head, and declared I was a great deal too much of an optimist, and thought more hopefully than reasonably of the national affairs. Heaven help me! I was thinking of nothing at that moment but of Martha and Major Frost.

Then there was a little stir outside in the hall. The firelight, and the darkness, and the suspense, and my own feelings generally, recalled to my mind so strongly the evening on which Llewellyn arrived, that I should not have been surprised had he walked in, when the door opened. But it was only Martha who came in. The firelight caught her as she entered, and showed me for one brief moment a different creature from the Martha I had parted with that morning in sobs and storms. I don't know what she wore; but I know that she was more elaborately dressed than usual, and had sparkling ornaments about her, which caught the light. I almost think, though I never could be sure, that it was her poor mother's diamond brooch which she had put on, though they were alone. She came in lightly, with something of the triumphant air I had noticed in her a year ago, before Captain Llewellyn's Christmas visit. It was evident at all events that my remonstrance had not broken her spirit. I could see her give a little glance to my corner, and I know that she saw I was there.

'Are you here, papa?' she said. 'You always sit, like crows, in

the dark, and nobody can see you.' Then she drew a chair into the circle. She took no notice of me or any one, but placed herself directly in the light of the fire.

'Yes, my dear,' said her father. 'I am glad you have come in. It begins to get cold.'

'We did not feel it cold,' said Martha, and then she laughed—a short little disconnected laugh, which indicated some disturbance of her calm; then she went on, with a tendency to short and broken sentences, like myself—'Papa,' she said, 'I may as well tell you at once. When the Major was here last he was poor, and could not speak—now he's well off. And he wants me to marry him. I like him better than—Ellis Llewellyn. I always—liked him better—and he loves *me*!'

Upon which Martha burst into tears.

If I were to try to describe the consternation produced by this unlooked-for speech, I should only prolong my story without making it more clear. The want of light heightened it, and confused us all doubly. If a bomb had burst in the peaceful place I don't think it could have produced a greater commotion. It was only the Admiral however who could say a word, and of course he was the proper person. Martha very soon came out of her tears to reply to him. He was angry, he was bewildered, he was wild for the moment. What was he to say to Llewellyn? What did she mean? How did Major Frost dare–? I confess that I was crying in my corner—I could not help it. When the Admiral began to storm, I put my hand on his arm, and made him come to me, and

whispered a word in his ear. Then the good man subsided into a bewildered silence. And after a while he went to the library, where Major Frost was waiting to know his fate.

It is unnecessary to follow out the story further. Llewellyn, poor fellow, had to wait a long time after all before Nelly would look at him. I never knew such a proud little creature. And she never would own to me that any spark of human feeling had been in her during that painful year. They were a proud family altogether. Martha met me ever after with her old affectionateness and composure—never asked pardon, nor said I was right, but at the same time never resented nor betrayed my interference. I believe she forgot it even, with the happy facility that belonged to her nature, and has not an idea now that it was anything but the influence of love and preference which made her cast off Llewellyn and choose Major Frost.

Sometimes however in the gray of the summer evenings, or the long, long winter nights, I think I might just as well have let things alone. There are two bright households the more in the world, no doubt. But the Admiral and I are both dull enough sometimes, now the girls are gone. He comes, and sits with me, which is always company, and it is not his fault I have not changed my residence and my lonely condition. But I say to him, why should we change, and give the world occasion to laugh, and make a talk of us at our age? Things are very well as they are. I believe we are better company to each other living next door, than if we were more closely allied; and our neighbours know us too well to make

any talk about our friendship. But still it often happens, even when we are together,—in the still evenings, and in the firelight, and when all the world is abroad of summer nights—that we both of us lament a little in the silence, and feel that it is very dull without the girls.

LADY DENZIL

CHAPTER I

The Denzils were the chief people at Dinglefield Green. Their house was by much the most considerable-looking house, and the grounds were beautiful. I say the most considerable-looking, for my own impression is that Dinglewood, which was afterwards bought by the stockbroker whose coming convulsed the whole Green, was in reality larger than the Lodge; but the Lodge, when Sir Thomas Denzil was in it, was all the same the centre of everything. It was like Windsor Castle to us neighbours, or perhaps in reality it was more what her Majesty's actual royal habitation is to the dwellers within her castle gates. We were the poor knights, the canons, the musical and ecclesiastical people who cluster about that mingled stronghold of the State and Church—but to the Lodge was it given to bestow distinction upon us. Those of us who visited Lady Denzil entered into all the privileges of rank; those who did not receive that honour fell into the cold shade—and a very uncomfortable shade it must have been. I speak, you will say, at my ease; for my people had known the Denzils ages before, and Sir Thomas most kindly sent his wife to call, almost before I had settled down into my cottage; but I remember how very sore Mrs. Wood felt about it, though it

surprised me at the time. 'I have been here five years, and have met them everywhere, but she has never found the way to my door. Not that I care in the least,' she said, with a flush on her cheek. She was a clergyman's widow, and very sensitive about her 'position,' poor thing—and almost found fault with me, as if I was to blame for having known the Denzils in my youth.

Lady Denzil, who had so much weight among us, was a very small personage. She would have been tiny and insignificant had she not been so stately and imposing. I don't know how she did it. She was some way over sixty at the time I speak of. Whatever the fashion was, she always wore long flowing dresses which swept the ground for a yard behind her, and cloaks ample and graceful: always large, always full, and always made of black silk. Even in winter, though her carriage would be piled with heaps of furs, she wore upon her little majestic person nothing but silk. Such silk!—you should have touched it to know what it was. The very sound of it, as it rustled softly after her over the summer lawn or the winter carpet, was totally different from the *frôlement* of ordinary robes. Some people said she had it made for herself expressly at Lyons. I don't know how that might be, but I know I never saw anything like it. I believe she had every variety in her wardrobe that heart of woman could desire: Indian shawls worth a fortune I *know* were among her possessions; but she never wore anything but that matchless silk —long dresses of it, and long, large, ample cloaks to correspond. Her hair was quite white, like silver. She had the brightest dark

eyes, shining out from under brows which were curved and lined as finely as when she was eighteen. Her colour was as fresh as a rose. I think there never was a more lovely old lady. Eighteen, indeed! It has its charms, that pleasant age. It is sweet to the eye, especially of man. Perhaps a woman, who has oftenest to lecture the creature, instead of falling down to worship, may not see so well the witchery which lies in the period; but find me any face of eighteen that could match Lady Denzil's. It had wrinkles, yes; but these were crossed by lines of thought, and lighted up by that soft breath of experience and forbearance which comes only with the years. Lady Denzil's eyes saw things that other eyes could not see. She knew by instinct when things were amiss. You could tell it by the charitable absence of all questioning, by a calm taking for granted the most unlikely explanations. Some people supposed they deceived her, but they never deceived her. And some people spoke of her extraordinary insight, and eyes that could see through a millstone. I believe her eyes were clear; but it was experience, only experience—long knowledge of the world, acquaintance with herself and human nature, and all the chances that befall us on our way through this life. That it was, and not any mere intuition or sharpness that put insight into Lady Denzil's eyes.

The curious thing however was that she had never had any troubles of her own. She had lived with Sir Thomas in the Lodge since a period dating far beyond my knowledge. It was a thing which was never mentioned among us, chiefly, I have no doubt,

because of her beautiful manners and stately look, though it came to be spoken of afterwards, as such things will; but the truth is, that nobody knew very clearly who Lady Denzil was. Sir Thomas's first wife was from Lancashire, of one of the best old families in the county, and it was not an unusual thing for new comers to get confused about this, and identify the present Lady Denzil with her predecessor; but I am not aware that any one really knew the rights of it or could tell who she was. I have heard the mistake made, and I remember distinctly the gracious and unsatisfactory way with which she put it aside. 'The first Lady Denzil was a Lancashire woman,' she said; 'she was one of the Tunstalls of Abbotts Tunstall, and a very beautiful and charming person.' This was all; she did not add, as anybody else would have done, Loamshire or Blankshire is my county. It was very unsatisfactory, but it was fine all the same—and closed everybody's mouth. There were always some connections on the Denzil side staying at the Lodge at the end of the year. No one could be kinder than she was to all Sir Thomas's young connections. But nobody belonging to Lady Denzil was ever seen among us. I don't think it was remarked at the time, but it came to be noted afterwards, and it certainly was very strange.

I never saw more perfect devotion than that which old Sir Thomas showed to his wife. He was about ten years older than she—a hale, handsome old man, nearly seventy. Had he been twenty-five and she eighteen he could not have been more tender, more careful of her. Often have I looked at her and wondered,

with the peaceful life she led, with the love and reverence and tender care which surrounded her, how she had ever come to know the darker side of life, and understand other people's feelings. No trouble seemed ever to have come near her. She put down her dainty little foot only to walk over soft carpets or through bright gardens; she never went anywhere where those long silken robes might not sweep, safe even from the summer dust, which all the rest of us have to brave by times. Lady Denzil never braved it. I have seen her sometimes—very seldom—with her dress gathered up in her arms in great billows, on the sheltered sunny lime-walk which was at one side of the Lodge, taking a little gentle exercise; but this was quite an unusual circumstance, and meant that the roads were too heavy or too slippery for her horses. On these rare occasions Sir Thomas would be at her side, like a courtly old gallant as he was. He was as deferential to his wife as if she had been a princess and he dependent on her favour: and at the same time there was a grace of old love in his reverence which was like a poem. It was a curious little paradise that one looked into over the ha-ha across the verdant lawns that encircled the Lodge. The two were old and childless, and sometimes solitary; but I don't think, though they opened their house liberally to kith, kin, and connections, that they ever felt less lonely than when they were alone. Two, where the two are one, is enough. To be sure the two in Eden were young. Yet it does but confer a certain tender pathos upon that companionship when they are old. I thought of the purest

romance I knew, of the softest creations of poetry, when I used to see old Sir Thomas in the lime-walk with his old wife.

But I was sorry she had not called on poor Mrs. Wood. It would have been of real consequence to that good woman if Lady Denzil had called. She was only a clergyman's widow, and a clergyman's widow may be anything, as everybody knows: she may be such a person as will be an acquisition anywhere, or she may be quite the reverse. It was because Mrs. Wood belonged to this indefinite class that Lady Denzil's visit would have been of such use. Her position was doubtful, poor soul! She was very respectable and very good in her way, and her daughters were nice girls; but there was nothing in themselves individually to raise them out of mediocrity. I took the liberty to say so one day when I was at the Lodge: but Lady Denzil did not see it somehow; and what could I do? And on the other hand it was gall and wormwood to poor Mrs. Wood every time she saw the carriage with the two bays stop at my door.

'I saw Lady Denzil here to-day,' she would say. 'You ought to feel yourself honoured. I must say I don't see why people should give in to her so. In my poor husband's time the duchess never came into the parish without calling. It need not be any object to me to be noticed by a bit of a baronet's wife.'

'No, indeed!' said I, being a coward and afraid to stand to my guns; 'I am sure you need not mind. And she is old, poor lady—and I am an old friend—and indeed I don't know that Lady Denzil professes to visit,' I went on faltering, with a sense of

getting deeper and deeper into the mud.

'Oh, pray don't say so to spare my feelings,' said Mrs. Wood with asperity. 'It is nothing to me whether she calls or not, but you must know, Mrs. Mulgrave, that Lady Denzil does make a point of calling on every one she thinks worth her while. I am sure she is quite at liberty to do as she pleases so far as I am concerned.' Here she stopped and relieved herself, drawing a long breath and fanning with her handkerchief her cheeks, which were crimson. 'But if I were to say I was connected with the peerage, or to talk about the titled people I do know,' she added with a look of spite, 'she would very soon find out where I lived: oh, trust her for that!'

'I think you must have taken up a mistaken idea,' I said, meekly. I had not courage enough to stand up in my friend's defence. Not that I am exactly a coward by nature, but Mrs. Wood was rather a difficult person to deal with; and I was sorry in the present instance, and felt that the grievance was a real one. 'I don't think Lady Denzil cares very much about the peerage. She is an old woman and has her fancies, I suppose.'

'Oh, you are a favourite!' said Mrs. Wood, tossing her head, as if it were my fault. 'You have the *entrées*, and we are spiteful who are left out, you know,' she added with pretended playfulness. It was a very affected little laugh however to which she gave utterance, and her cheeks flamed crimson. I was very sorry—I did not know what to say to make things smooth again. If I had been Lady Denzil's keeper, I should have taken her to call at Rose Cottage next day. But I was not Lady Denzil's keeper. It was great

kindness of her to visit me: how could I force her against her will to visit other people? A woman of Mrs. Wood's age, who surely could not have got so far through the world without a little understanding of how things are managed, ought to have known that it could do her very little good to quarrel with me.

And then the girls would come to me when there was anything going on at the Lodge. 'We met the Miss Llewellyns the other day,' Adelaide said on one occasion. 'We thought them very nice. They are staying with Lady Denzil, you know. I wish you would make Lady Denzil call on mamma, Mrs. Mulgrave. It is so hard to come and settle in a place and be shut out from all the best parties. Until you have been at the Lodge you are considered nobody on the Green.'

'The Lodge can't make us different from what we are,' said Nora, the other sister, who was of a different temper. 'I should be ashamed to think it mattered whether Lady Denzil called or not.'

'But it does matter a great deal when they are going to give a ball,' said Adelaide very solemnly. 'The best balls going, some of the officers told me; and everybody will be there—except Nora and me,' said the poor girl. 'Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave, I wish you would make Lady Denzil call!'

'But, my dear, I can't make Lady Denzil do anything,' I said; 'I have no power over her. She comes to see me sometimes, but we are not intimate, and I have no influence. She comes because my people knew the Denzils long ago. She has her own ways. I could not make her do one thing or another. It is wrong to speak

so to me.'

'But you could if you would try,' said Adelaide; as she spoke, we could hear the sound of the croquet balls from the Lodge, and voices and laughter. We were all three walking along the road, under shelter of the trees. She gave such a wistful look when she heard them, that it went to my heart. It was not a very serious trouble, it is true. But still to feel one's self shut out from anything, is hard when one is twenty. I had to hurry past the gate, to restrain the inclination I had to brave everything, and take them in with me, as my friends, to join the croquet party. I know very well what would have happened had I done so. Lady Denzil would have been perfectly sweet and gracious, and sent them away delighted with her; but she would never have crossed my threshold again. And what good would that have done them? The fact was, they had nothing particular to recommend them; no special qualities of their own to make up for their want of birth and connection; and this being the case what could any one say?

It gave one a very different impression of Lady Denzil, to see how she behaved when poor Mrs. Stoke was in such trouble about her youngest boy. I had been with her calling, and Mrs. Stoke had told us a whole long story about him; how good-hearted he was, and how generous, spending his money upon everybody. It was a very hard matter for me to keep my countenance, for of course I knew Everard Stoke, and what kind of boy he was. But Lady Denzil took it all with the greatest attention and sympathy. I could not but speak of it when we came out. 'Poor Mrs. Stoke!'

said I, 'it is strange how she can deceive herself so—and she must have known we knew better. You who have seen poor Everard grow up, Lady Denzil–'

'Yes, my dear,' she said, 'you are right; and yet, do you know, I think you are wrong too? She is not deceived. She knows a great deal better than we do. But then she is on the other side of the scene, and she sees into the boy's heart a little. I hope she sees into his heart.'

'I fear it is a very bad heart; I should not think it was any pleasure to look into it,' said I in my haste. Lady Denzil gave me a soft, half-reproachful look. 'Well,' she said, and gave a sigh, 'it has always been one of my great fancies, that God was more merciful than man, because He saw fully what was in all our hearts—what we meant, poor creatures that we are, not what we did. We so seldom have any confidence in Him for that. We think He will forgive and save, but we don't think He understands, and sees everything, and knows that nothing is so bad as it seems. Perhaps it is dangerous doctrine; at least the vicar would think so, I fear.'

'In the case of Everard Stoke,' said I stupidly, coming back to the starting point.

'My dear,' said Lady Denzil with a little impatience, 'the older one grows, the less one feels inclined to judge any one. Indeed when one grows quite old,' she went on after a pause, smiling a little, as if it were at the thought that she, whom no doubt she could remember so thoughtless and young, *was* quite old, 'one

comes to judge not at all. Poor Everard, he never was a good boy —but I dare say his mother knows him best, and he is better than is thought.'

'At least it was a comfort to her to see you look as if you believed her,' said I, not quite entering into the argument. Lady Denzil took no notice of this speech. It was a beautiful bright day, and it was but a step from Mrs. Stoke's cottage to the Lodge gates, which we were just about entering. But at that moment there was a little party of soldiers marching along the high-road, at right angles from where we stood. It is not far from the Green to the barracks, and their red coats were not uncommon features in the landscape. These men however were marching in a business-like way, not lingering on the road: and among them was a man in a shooting-coat, handcuffed, poor fellow! It was a deserter they were taking back to the punishment that awaited him. I made some meaningless exclamation or other, and stood still, looking after them for a moment. Then I suppose my interest failed as they went on, at their rapid, steady pace, turning their backs upon us. I came back to Lady Denzil, my passing distraction over; but when I looked at her, there was something in her face that struck me with the deepest wonder. She had not come back to me. She was standing absorbed, watching them; the colour all gone out of her soft old cheeks, and the saddest, wistful, longing gaze in her eyes. It was not pity—it was something mightier, more intense. She did not breathe or move, but stood gazing, gazing after them. When they had disappeared, she came to herself; her

hands, which had been clasped tightly, fell loose at her sides; she gave a long deep sigh, and then she became conscious of my eyes upon her, and the colour came back with a rush to her face.

'I am always interested about soldiers,' she said faintly, turning as she spoke to open the gate. That was all the notice she took of it. But the incident struck me more than my account of it may seem to justify. If such a thing had been possible as that the deserter might have been her husband or her brother, one could have understood it. Had I seen such a look on Mrs. Stoke's face, I should have known it was Everard. But here was Lady Denzil, a contented childless woman, without anybody to disturb her peace. Sympathy must indeed have become perfect, before such a wistfulness could come into any woman's eyes.

Often since I have recalled that scene to my mind, and wondered over it; the quick march of the soldiers on the road; the man in the midst with death environing him all round, and most likely despair in his heart; and that one face looking on, wistful as love, sad as death—and yet with no cause either for her sadness or her love. It did not last long, it is true; but it was one of the strangest scenes I ever witnessed in my life.

It even appeared to me next day as if Lady Denzil had been a little shaken, either by her visit to Mrs. Stoke, or by this strange little episode which nobody knew of. She had taken to me, which I confess I felt as a great compliment; and Sir Thomas came in to ask me to go to her next afternoon. 'My lady has a headache,' he said in a quaint way he had of speaking of her: I think he would

have liked to call her my queen or my princess. When he said 'my lady' there was something chivalric, something romantic in his very tone. When I went into the drawing-room at the Lodge the great green blind was drawn over the window on the west side, and the trees gave the same green effect to the daylight, at the other end. The east windows looked out upon the lime-walk, and the light came in softly, green and shadowy, through the silken leaves. She was lying on the sofa, which was not usual with her. As soon as I entered the room she called me to come and sit by her—and of course she did not say a word about yesterday. We went on talking for an hour and more, about the trees, and the sunset; about what news there was; girls going to be married, and babies coming, and other such domestic incidents. And sometimes the conversation would languish for a moment, and I did think once there was something strange in her eyes, when she looked at me, as if she had something to tell and was looking into my face to see whether she might or might not do it. But it never went any further; we began to speak of Molly Jackson, and that was an interminable subject. Molly was a widow in the village, and she gave us all a great deal of trouble. She had a quantity of little children, to whom the people on the Green were very kind, and she was a good-natured soft soul, always falling into some scrape or other. This time was the worst of all; it was when the talk got up about Thomas Short. People said that Molly was going to marry him. It would have been very foolish for them both, of course. He was poor and he was getting

old, and would rather have hindered than helped her with her children. We gentlefolks may, or may not, be sentimental about our own concerns; but we see things in their true light when they take place among our poor neighbours. As for the two being a comfort to each other we never entered into that question; there were more important matters concerned.

'I don't know what would become of the poor children,' said I. 'The man would never put up with them, and indeed it could not be expected; and they have no friends to go to. But I don't think Molly would be so wicked; she may be a fool but she has a mother's heart.'

Lady Denzil gave a faint smile and turned on her sofa as if something hurt her; she did not answer me all at once—and as I sat for a minute silent in that soft obscurity, Molly Jackson, I acknowledge, went out of my head. Then all at once when I had gone on to something else, she spoke; and her return to the subject startled me, I could not have told how.

'There are different ways of touching a mother's heart,' she said; 'she might think it would be for their good; I don't think it could be, for my part; I don't think it ever is; a woman is deceived, or she deceives herself; and then when it is too late–'

'What is too late?' said Sir Thomas behind us. He had come in at the great window, and we had not noticed. I thought Lady Denzil gave a little start, but there was no sign of it in her face.

'We were talking of Molly Jackson,' she said. 'Nothing is ever too late here, thanks to your precise habits, you old soldier. Molly

must be talked to, Mrs. Mulgrave,' she said, turning to me.

'Oh, yes, she will be talked to,' said I; 'I know the rector and his wife have both called; and last time I saw her, Mrs. Wood–'

'You are not one of the universal advisers,' said Lady Denzil, patting my arm with her white hand. It was no virtue on my part, but she spoke as if she meant it for a compliment. And then we had to tell the whole story over again to Sir Thomas, who was very fond of a little gossip like all the gentlemen, but had to have everything explained to him, and never knew what was coming next. He chuckled and laughed as men do over it. 'Old fool!' he said. 'A woman with half-a-dozen children.' It was not Molly but Thomas Short that he thought would be a fool; and on our side, it is true that we had not been thinking of him.

Molly Jackson has not much to do with this story, but yet it may be as well to say that she listened to reason, and did not do anything so absurd. It was a relief to all our minds when Thomas went to live in Langham parish the spring after, and married somebody there. I believe it was a girl out of the workhouse, who might have been his daughter, and led him a very sad life. But still in respect to Molly it was a relief to our minds. I hope she was of the same way of thinking. I know for one thing that she lost her temper, the only time I ever saw her do it—and was very indignant about the young wife. 'Old fool!' she said, and again it was Thomas that was meant. We had a way of talking a good deal about the village folks, and we all did a great deal for them—perhaps, on the whole, we did too much. When anything

happened to be wanting among them, instead of making an effort to get it for themselves, it was always the ladies on the Green they came to. And, of course, we interfered in our turn.

CHAPTER II

It was in the spring of the following year that little Mary first came to the Lodge. Sir Thomas had been absent for some time, on business, Lady Denzil said, and it was he who brought the child home. It is all impressed on my mind by the fact that I was there when they arrived. He was not expected until the evening, and I had gone to spend an hour with Lady Denzil in the afternoon. It was a bright spring day, as warm as summer; one of those sweet surprises that come upon us in England in intervals between the gray east wind and the rain. The sunshine had called out a perfect crowd of golden crocuses along the borders. They had all blown out quite suddenly, as if it had been an actual voice that called them, and God's innocent creatures had rushed forth to answer to their names. And there were heaps of violets about the Lodge which made the air sweet. And there is something in that first exquisite touch of spring which moves all hearts. Lady Denzil had come out with me to the lawn. I thought she was quieter than usual, with the air of a woman listening for something. Everything was very still, and yet in the sunshine one felt as if one could hear the buds unfolding, the young grass and leaflets thrilling with their new life. But it did not seem to me that Lady Denzil was listening to these. I said, 'Do you expect Sir Thomas now?' with a kind of vague curiosity; and she looked in my face with a sudden quick glance of something like suspicion

which I could not understand.

'Do I look as if I expected something?' she said. 'Yes—I expect some news that probably I shall not like. But it does not matter, my dear. It is nothing that affects me.'

She said these words with a smile that was rather dreary to see. It was not like Lady Denzil. It was like saying, 'So long as it does not affect me you know I don't care,'—which was so very, very far from my opinion of her. I did not know what to answer. Her tone somehow disturbed the spring feeling, and the harmony of the flowers.

'I wish Sir Thomas had been here on such a lovely day,' she said, after a while; 'he enjoys it so. Peace is very pleasant, my dear, when you are old. You don't quite appreciate it yet, as we do.' And then she paused again and seemed to listen, and permitted herself the faintest little sigh.

'I think I am older than you are, Lady Denzil,' I said.

Then she laughed in her natural soft way. 'I dare say you are,' she said. 'That is the difference between your restless middle age and our *oldness*. You feel old because you feel young. That's how it is; whereas, being really old, we can afford to be young again—sometimes,' she added softly. The last word was said under her breath. I don't suppose she thought I heard it; but I did, being very quick of hearing, and very fond of her, and feeling there was something underneath which I did not know.

Just then there came the sound of wheels upon the road, and Lady Denzil started slightly. 'You have put it into my head that Sir

Thomas might come by the three o'clock train,' she said. 'It would be about time for it now.' She had scarcely stopped speaking and we had just turned towards the gate, when a carriage entered. I saw at once it was one of the common flys that are to be had at the station, and that it was Sir Thomas who put his head out at the window. A moment after it stopped. He had seen Lady Denzil on the lawn. He got out with that slight hesitation which betrays an old man; and then he turned and lifted something out of the carriage. For the first moment one could not tell what it was—he made a long stride on to the soft greensward, with his eyes fixed upon Lady Denzil, and then he put down the child on the lawn. 'Go to that lady,' he said. For my part I stood and stared, knowing nothing of the feelings that might lie underneath. The child stood still with her little serious face and looked at us both for a moment, and then she walked steadily up to Lady Denzil, who had not moved. I was quite unprepared for what followed. Lady Denzil fell down on her knees on the grass—she took the child to her, into her arms, close to her breast. All at once she fell into a passion of tears. And yet that does not express what I saw. It was silent; there were no cries nor sobs, such as a young woman might have uttered. The tears fell as if they had been pent up all her life, as if all her life she had been waiting for this moment: while Sir Thomas stood looking on, half sad, half satisfied. It seemed a revelation to him as it was to me. All this time when she had looked so serene and had been so sweet, had she been carrying those tears in her heart! I think that must have been what

was passing through Sir Thomas's mind. I had stood and stared, as one does when one is unexpectedly made the spectator of a crisis in another life. When I came to myself I was ashamed of spying as it were upon Lady Denzil's feelings. I hastened away, shaking hands with Sir Thomas as I passed him. And so entirely was his mind absorbed in the scene before him, that I scarcely think he knew who I was.

After this it may be supposed I took a very great interest in little Mary. At first I was embarrassed and did not quite know what to do—whether I should go back next day and ask for the child, and give Lady Denzil an opportunity of getting over any confusion she might feel at the recollection that I had been present—or whether I should stay away; but it turned out that Lady Denzil was not half so sensitive as I was on the subject. I stayed away for one whole day thinking about little else—and the next day I went, lest they should think it strange. It seemed quite curious to me to be received as if nothing had happened. There was no appearance of anything out of the ordinary course. When I went in Lady Denzil held out her hand to me as usual without rising from her chair. 'What has become of you?' she said, and made me sit down by her, as she always did. After we had talked a while she rang the bell. 'I have something to show you,' she said smiling. And then little Mary came in, in her little brown holland overall, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She was the most lovely child I ever saw. I know when I say this that everybody will immediately think of a golden-haired,

blue-eyed darling. But she was not of that description. Her hair was brown—not dark, but of the shade which grows dark with years; and it was very fine silky hair, not frizzy and rough as is the fashion now-a-days. Her eyes were brown too, of that tender wistful kind which are out of fashion like the hair. Every look the child gave was an appeal. There are some children's eyes that look at you with perfect trust, believing in everybody; and these are sweet eyes. But little Mary's were sweeter still, for they told you she believed in *you*. 'Take care of me: be good to me—I trust you,' was what they said; 'not everybody, but you.' This was the expression in them; and I never knew anybody who could resist that look. Then she had the true child's beauty of a lovely complexion, pure red and white. She came up to me and looked at me with those tender serious eyes, and then slid her soft little hand into mine. Even when I had ceased talking to her and petting her, she never took her eyes away from my face. It was the creature's way of judging of the new people among whom she had been brought—for she was only about six, too young to draw much insight from words. I was glad to bend my head over her, to kiss her sweet little face and smooth her pretty hair by way of hiding a certain embarrassment I felt. But I was the only one of the three that was embarrassed. Lady Denzil sat and looked at the child with eyes that seemed to run over with content. 'She is going to stay with me, and take care of me,' she said, with a smile of absolute happiness; 'are not you, little Mary?'

'Yes, my lady,' said the little thing, turning, serious as a judge,

to the old lady. I could not help giving a little start as I looked from one to the other, and saw the two pair of eyes meet. Lady Denzil was sixty, and little Mary was but six; but it was the same face; I felt quite confused after I had made this discovery, and sat silent and heard them talk to each other. Even in the little voice there was a certain trill which was like Lady Denzil's. Then the whole scene rushed before me. Lady Denzil on her knees, her tears pouring forth and the child clasped in her arms. What did it mean? My lady was childless—and even had it been otherwise, that baby never could have been *her* child—who was she? I was so bewildered and surprised that it took from me the very power of speech.

After this strange introduction the child settled down as an inmate of the Lodge, and was seen and admired by everybody. And every one discovered the resemblance. The neighbours on the Green all found it out, and as there was no reason we knew of why she should not be Lady Denzil's relation, we all stated our opinion plainly—except perhaps myself. I had seen more than the rest, though that was almost nothing. I had a feeling that there was an unknown story beneath, and somehow I had not the courage to say to Lady Denzil as I sat there alone with her, and had her perhaps at a disadvantage. 'How like the child is to you!' But other people were not so cowardly. Not long after, two or three of us met at the Lodge, at the hour of afternoon tea, which was an invention of the time which Lady Denzil had taken to very kindly. Among the rest was young Mrs. Plymley,

who was not precisely one of us. She was one of the Herons of Marshfield, and she and her husband had taken Willowbrook for the summer. She was a pleasant little woman, but she was fond of talking—nobody could deny that. And she had children of her own, and made a great fuss over little Mary the moment she saw her. The child was too much a little lady to be disagreeable, but I could see she did not like to be lifted up on a stranger's knee, and admired and chattered over. 'I wish my Ada was half as pretty,' Mrs. Plymley said; 'but Ada is so like her poor dear papa,' and here she pretended to sigh. 'I am so fond of pretty children. It is hard upon me to have mine so plain. Oh, you little darling! Mary what? you have only told me half your name. Lady Denzil, one can see in a moment she belongs to you.'

Lady Denzil at the moment was pouring out tea. All at once the silver teapot in her hand seemed to give a jerk, as if it were a living creature, and some great big boiling drops fell on her black dress. It was only for a single second, and she had presence of mind to set it down, and smile and say she was awkward, and it was nothing. 'My arm is always shaky when I hold anything heavy,' she said; 'ever since I had the rheumatism in it. Then she turned to Mrs. Plymley, whose injudicious suggestion we had all forgotten in our fright. Perhaps Lady Denzil had lost her self-possession a little. Perhaps it was only that she thought it best to reply at once, so that everybody might hear. 'Belongs to me?' she said with her clear voice. And somehow we all felt immediately that something silly and uncalled for had been said.

'I mean your side of the house,' said poor Mrs. Plymley abashed. She was young and nervous, and felt, like all the rest of us, that she was for the moment the culprit at the bar.

'She belongs to neither side of the house,' said Lady Denzil, with even unnecessary distinctness. 'Sir Thomas knows her people, and in his kindness he thought a change would be good for her. She is no—connection; nothing at all to us.'

'Oh, I am sure I beg your pardon,' said Mrs. Plymley; and she let little Mary slide down from her lap, and looked very uncomfortable. None of us indeed were at our ease, for we had all been saying it in private. Only little Mary, standing in the middle, looked wistfully round upon us, questioning, yet undisturbed. And Lady Denzil, too, stood and looked. At that moment the likeness was stronger than ever.

'It is very droll,' said Mrs. Damerel, the rector's wife, whose eye was caught by it, like mine. 'She is very like you, Lady Denzil; I never saw an incidental likeness so strong.'

'Poor little Mary! do you think she is like me?' said Lady Denzil with a curious quiver in her voice; and she bent over the child all at once and kissed her. Sir Thomas had been at the other end of the room, quite out of hearing. I don't know by what magnetism he could have known that something agitating was going on—I did not even see him approach or look; but all at once, just as his wife betrayed that strange thrill of feeling, Sir Thomas was at her elbow. He touched her arm quite lightly as he stood by her side.

'I should like some tea,' he said.

She stood up and looked at him for a moment as if she did not understand. And then she turned to the tea-table with something like a blush of shame on her face. Then he drew forward a chair and sat down by Mrs. Plymley and began to talk. He was a very good talker when he pleased, and in two seconds we had all wandered away to our several subjects, and were in full conversation again. But it was some time before Lady Denzil took any part in it. She was a long while pouring out those cups of tea. Little Mary, as if moved by some unconscious touch of sympathy, stole away with her doll into a corner. It was as if the two had been made out of the same material and thrilled to the same touch—they both turned their backs upon us for the moment. I don't suppose anybody but myself noticed this; and to be sure it was simply because I had seen the meeting between them, and knew there was something in it more than the ordinary visit to the parents' friends of a little delicate child.

Besides, the child never looked like a little visitor; she had brought no maid with her, and she spoke very rarely of her home. I don't know how she might be dressed under those brown holland overalls, but these were the only outside garb she ever wore. I don't mean to say they were ugly or wanting in neatness; they were such things as the children at the Rectory wore in summer when they lived in the garden and the fields. But they did not look suitable for the atmosphere of the Lodge. By and by however these outer garments disappeared. The little creature

blossomed out as it were out of her brown husk, and put forth new flowers. After the first few weeks she wore nothing but dainty white frocks, rich with needlework. I recognized Lady Denzil's taste in everything she put on. It was clear that her little wardrobe was being silently renewed, and every pretty thing which a child of her age could fitly wear was being added to it. This could never have been done to a little visitor who had come for change of air. Then a maid was got for her, whom Lady Denzil was very particular about; and no one ever spoke of the time when little Mary should be going away. By degrees she grew to belong to the place, to be associated with everything in it. When you approached the house, which had always been so silent, perhaps it was a burst of sweet childish laughter that met your ears; perhaps a little song, or the pleasant sound of her little feet on the gravel in the sunny lime-walk. The servants were all utterly under her sway. They spoke of little Miss Mary as they might have spoken of a little princess whose word was law. As for Sir Thomas, I think he was the first subject in her realm. She took to patronizing and ordering him about before she had been a month at the Lodge. 'Sir Thomas,' she would say in her clear little voice, 'come and walk;' and the old gentleman would get up and go out with her, and hold wonderful conversations, as we could see, looking after them from the window. Lady Denzil did not seem either to pet her, or to devote herself to her, as all the rest of the house did. But there was something in her face when she looked at the child which passes description. It was a sort of ineffable content and

satisfaction, as if she had all that heart could desire and asked no more. Little Mary watched her eye whenever they were together with a curious sympathy more extraordinary still. She seemed to know by intuition when my lady wanted her. ‘’Es, my lady,’ the child would say, watching with her sweet eyes. It was the only little divergence she made from correctness of speech, and somehow it pleased my ear. I suppose she said ‘My Lady’ because Sir Thomas did, and that I liked too. To an old lady like Lady Denzil it is such a pretty title; I fell into it myself without being aware.

CHAPTER III

Thus the world went softly on, till the roses of June had come instead of the spring crocuses. Everything went on softly at the Green. True, there was a tragedy now and then, even among us, like that sad affair of Everard Stoke; and sometimes a very troublesome complication, going near to break some hearts, like that of Nelly Fortis—but for the most part we were quiet enough. And that was a very quiet time. Little Mary had grown the pet of the Green before June. The little Damerels, who were nice children enough, were not to be compared with her; and then there were so many of them, whereas Mary was all alone like a little star. We all petted her—but she was one of the children whom it is impossible to spoil. She was never pert or disagreeable, like little Agatha Damerel. She had her little childish fits of temper by times, but was always sorry and always sweet, with her soft appealing eyes—a little woman, but never knowing or forward, like so many children now-a-days. She was still but a baby, poor darling, not more than seven years old, when that dreadful scene broke in upon our quietness which I have now to tell.

It was June, and there was a large party on the lawn before the Lodge. As long as the season lasted, while there were quantities of people in town, Lady Denzil often had these parties. We were all there of course; everybody on the Green whom she visited—

(and I used to be very sorry for Mrs. Wood and her daughters when one of them was going to take place). We were in the habit of meeting continually in the same way, to see the young people play croquet and amuse themselves; and there was perhaps a little monotony in it. But Lady Denzil always took care to have some variety. There would be a fine lady or two from town, bringing with her a whiff of all the grandeurs and gaieties we had no particular share in, and setting an example to the girls in their dress and accessories. I never was extravagant in my dress, nor encouraged such a thing—I think no true lady ever does—but a real fashionable perfect toilette is generally so complete, and charming, and harmonious, that it is good for one to see it now and then, especially for girls, though of course ignorant persons and men don't understand why. And then there were a few gentlemen—with all the gossip of the clubs, and town talk, which made a very pleasant change to us. It was an unusually brilliant party that day. There was the young Countess of Berkhampstead, who was a great beauty and had married so strangely; people said the Earl was not very right in his head, and told the oddest stories about him. Poor thing, I fear she could not help herself —but she was the loveliest creature imaginable, and very nice then, though she went wrong afterwards. She sat by Lady Denzil's side on the sofa, which was placed just before the great bank of roses. It was pretty to see them together: the lovely young lady, with her fits of gaiety and pretty languid stillnesses, letting us all admire her as if she felt what a pleasure it was to us; and the

lovely old lady, so serene, so fair, so kind. I don't know, for my part, which was the more beautiful. There were other fine ladies besides Lady Berkhampstead, and, as I have just said, it was a very brilliant party. There never was a more glorious day; the sky was a delight to look at, and the rich full foliage of the trees clustered out against the blue, as if they leant caressingly upon the soft air around them. The breath of the roses went everywhere, and behind Lady Denzil's sofa they threw themselves up into space—great globes of burning crimson, and delicate blush, and creamy white. They were very rich in roses at the Lodge—I remember one wall quite covered with the *Gloire de Dijon*—but that is a digression. It was a broad lawn, and left room for several sets of croquet players, besides all the other people. The house was on a higher level at one side, the grounds and woods behind, and in front over the ha-ha we had a pretty glimpse of the Green, where cricket was being played, and the distant houses on the other side. It was like fairy-land, with just a peep of the outer world, by which we kept hold upon the fact that we were human, and must trudge away presently to our little houses. On the grass before Lady Denzil little Mary was sitting, a little white figure, with a brilliant picture-book which somebody had brought her. She was seated sideways, half facing to Lady Denzil, half to the house, and giving everybody from time to time a look from her tender eyes. Her white frock which blazed in the sunshine was the highest light in the picture, as a painter would have said, and gave it a kind of centre. I was not playing croquet, and there came

a moment when I was doing nothing particular, and therefore had time to remark upon the scene around me. As I raised my eyes, my attention was all at once attracted by a strange figure, quite alien to the group below, which stood on the approach to the house. The house, as I have said, was on a higher level, and consequently the road which approached it was higher too, on the summit of the bank which sloped down towards the lawn. A woman stood above gazing at us. At first it seemed to me that she was one of the servants: she had a cotton gown on, and a straw bonnet, and a little black silk cloak. I could not say that she was shabby or wretched-looking, but her appearance was a strange contrast to the pretty crowd on the lawn. She seemed to have been arrested on her way to the door by the sound of voices, and stood there looking down upon us—a strange, tall, threatening figure, which awoke, I could not tell how, a certain terror in my mind. By degrees it seemed to me that her gaze fixed upon little Mary —and I felt more frightened still; though what harm could any one do to the child with so many anxious protectors looking on? However people were intent upon their games, or their talks, or their companions, and nobody saw her but myself. At last I got so much alarmed that I left my seat to tell Sir Thomas of her. I had just made one step towards him, when all at once, with a strange cry, the woman darted down the bank. It was at little Mary she flew: she rushed down upon her like a tempest, and seized the child, crushing up her pretty white frock and her dear little figure violently in her arms. I cried out too in my fright—for I thought

she was mad—and various people sprang from their chairs, one of the last to be roused being Lady Denzil, who was talking very earnestly to Lady Berkhampstead. The woman gave a great loud passionate outcry as she seized upon little Mary. And the child cried out too, one single word which in a moment transfixed me where I stood, and caught Lady Denzil's ear like the sound of a trumpet. It was a cry almost like a moan, full of terror and dismay and repugnance; and yet it was one of the sweetest words that ever falls on human ears. The sound stopped everything, even the croquet, and called Sir Thomas forward from the other end of the lawn. The one word that Mary uttered, that filled us all with such horror and consternation, was 'Mamma!'

'Yes, my darling,' cried the woman, holding her close, crumpling, even crushing her up in her arms. 'They took you from me when I wasn't myself! Did I know where they were going to bring you? Here! Oh, yes, I see it all now. Don't touch my child! don't interfere with my child!—she sha'n't stay here another day. Her father would curse her if he knew she was here.'

'Oh, please set me down,' said little Mary. 'Oh, mamma, please don't hurt me. Oh, my lady!' cried the poor child, appealing to her protectress. Lady Denzil got up tottering as she heard this cry. She came forward with every particle of colour gone from her face. She was so agitated her lips could scarcely form the words; but she had the courage to lay her hand upon the woman's arm,—

'Set her down,' she said. 'If you have any claim—set her down

—it shall be seen into. Sir Thomas–'

The stranger turned upon her. She was a woman about five-and-thirty, strong and bold and vigorous. I don't deny she was a handsome woman. She had big blazing black eyes, and a complexion perhaps a little heightened by her walk in the heat. She turned upon Lady Denzil, shaking off her hand, crushing little Mary still closer in one arm, and raising the other with a wild theatrical gesture.

'You!' she cried; 'if I were to tell her father she was with you, he would curse her. How dare you look me in the face—a woman that's come after her child! you that gave up your own flesh and blood. Ay! You may stare at her, all you fine folks. There's the woman that sold her son to marry her master. She's got her grandeur, and all she bid for; and she left her boy to be brought up in the streets, and go for a common soldier. And she's never set eyes on him, never since he was two years old; and now she's come and stole my little Mary from me!'

Before this speech was half spoken every soul in the place had crowded round to hear. No one thought how rude it was. Utter consternation was in everybody's look. As for Lady Denzil, she stood like a statue, as white as marble, in the same spot, hearing it all. She did not move. She was like an image set down there, capable of no individual action. She stood and gazed, and heard it all, and saw us all listening. I cannot tell what dreadful pangs were rending her heart; put she stood like a dead woman in the sunshine, neither contradicting her accuser nor making even one

gesture in her own defence.

Then Sir Thomas, on whom there had surely been some spell, came forward, dividing the crowd, and took the stranger by the arm. 'Set down the child,' he said in a shaking voice. 'Set her down. How dare *you* speak of a mother's rights? Did you ever do anything for her? Set down the child, woman! You have no business here.'

'I never forsook my own flesh and blood,' cried the enraged creature, letting poor little Mary almost fall down out of her arms, but keeping fast hold of her. 'I've a better right here than any of these strangers. I'm her son's wife. She's little Mary's grandmother, though she'll deny it. She's that kind of woman that would deny to her last breath. I know she would. She's the child's grandmother. She's my mother-in-law. She's never seen her son since he was two years old. If he hears the very name of mother he curses and swears. Let me alone, I have come for my child! And I've come to give that woman her due!'

'Go!' cried Sir Thomas. His voice was awful. He would not touch her, for he was a gentleman; but the sound of his voice made my very knees bend and tremble. 'Go!' he said—'not a word more.' He was so overcome at last that he put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her away, and wildly beckoned to the servants, who were standing listening too. The woman grasped little Mary by her dress. She crushed up the child's pretty white cape in her hot hand and dragged her along with her. But she obeyed. She dared not resist his voice; and she had done all the

harm it was possible to do.

'I'll go,' she said. 'None of you had better touch me. I'm twice as strong as you, though you're a man. But I'll go. She knows what I think of her now; and you all know what she is!' she cried, raising her voice. 'To marry that old man, she deserted her child at two years old, and never set eyes on him more. That's Lady Denzil. Now you all know, ladies and gentlemen; and I'll go.'

All this time Lady Denzil never stirred; but when the woman moved away, dragging little Mary with her, all at once my lady stretched out her hands and gave a wild cry. 'The child!' she cried; 'the child!' And then the little thing turned to her with that strange sympathy we had all noticed. I don't know how she twitched herself out of her mother's excited, passionate grasp, but she rushed back and threw herself at Lady Denzil's feet, and clutched hold of her dress. My lady, who had not moved nor spoken except those two words—who was old and capable of no such exertion, stooped over her and lifted her up. I never saw such a sight. She was as pale as if she had been dead. She had received such a shock as might well have killed her. Notwithstanding, this is what she did. She lifted up the child in her arms, broke away from us who were surrounding her, mounted the steep bank like a girl, with her treasure clasped close to her bosom, and before any one knew, before there was time to speak, or even almost think, had disappeared with her into the house. The woman would have rushed at her, sprung upon her, if she had not been held fast. It may easily be imagined what a scene it was when the mistress

of the feast disappeared, and a family secret so extraordinary was thus tossed to public discussion. The house door rang after Lady Denzil, as she rushed in, with a sound like a cannon shot. The stranger stood struggling in the midst of a group of men, visitors and servants, some of whom were trying to persuade, some to force her away. Sir Thomas stood by himself, with his old pale hands piteously clasped together, and his head bent. He was overwhelmed by shame and trouble, and the shock of this frightful scene. He did not seem able for the first moment to face any one, to lift his eyes to the disturbed and fluttering crowd, who were so strangely in the way. And we all stood about thunderstruck, staring in each other's faces, not knowing what to do or to say. Lady Berkhampstead, with the instinct of a great lady, was the first to recover herself. She turned to me, I scarcely know why, nor could she have told why. 'I know my carriage is waiting,' she said, 'and I could not think of disturbing dear Lady Denzil to say good-bye. Will you tell her how sorry I am to go away without seeing her?' They all came crowding round me with almost the same words, as soon as she had set the example. And presently Sir Thomas roused up as it were from his stupor. And for the next few minutes there was nothing but shaking of hands, and the rolling up of carriages, and an attempt on the part of everybody to smile and look as if nothing had happened. 'So long as it does not make dear Lady Denzil ill,' one of the ladies said. 'This is one of the dangers of living so close upon the road. It might have happened to any of us,' said another. 'Of course the

creature is mad; she should be shut up somewhere.' They said such words with the natural impulse of saying anything to break the terrible impression of the scene; but they were all almost as much shocked and shaken as the principals in it. I never saw such a collection of pale faces as those that went from the Lodge that afternoon. I was left last of all. Somehow the woman who had made so dreadful a disturbance had disappeared without anybody knowing where. Sir Thomas and I were left alone on the lawn, which ten minutes ago—I don't think it was longer—had been so gay and so crowded. So far as I was myself concerned, that was the most trying moment of all. Everybody had spoken to me as if I belonged to the house, but in reality I did not belong to the house; and I felt like a spy as I stood with Sir Thomas all alone. And what was worse, he felt it too, and looked at me with the forced painful smile he had put on for the others, as if he felt I was just like them, and it was also needful for me.

'I beg your pardon for staying,' I said, 'don't you think I could be of any use? Lady Denzil perhaps–'

Sir Thomas took my hand and shook it in an imperative way. 'No, no,' he said with his set smile. He even turned me towards the gate and touched my shoulder with his agitated hand—half no doubt, because he knew I meant kindly—but half to send me away.

'She might like me to do something,' I said piteously. But all that Sir Thomas did was to wring my hand and pat my shoulder, and say, 'No, no.' I was obliged to follow the rest with an aching

heart. As I went out one of the servants came after me. It was a man who had been long in the family, and knew a great deal about the Denzils. He came to tell me he was very much frightened about the woman, who had disappeared nobody could tell how. 'I'm afraid she's hiding about somewhere,' he said, 'to come again.' And then he glanced round to see that nobody was by, and looked into my face. 'All that about my lady is true,' he said —'true as gospel. I've knowed it this forty years.'

'They've been very kind to you, Wellman,' I said indignantly —'for shame! to think you should turn upon your good mistress now.'

'Turn upon her!' said Wellman; 'not if I was to be torn in little bits; but being such a friend of the family, I thought it might be a satisfaction to you, ma'am, to know as it was true.'

If anything could have made my heart more heavy I think it would have been that. He thought it would be a satisfaction to me to know! And after the first moment of pity was past, were there not some people to whom it would be a satisfaction to know? who would tell it all over and gloat upon it, and say to each other that pride went before a fall? My heart was almost bursting as I crossed the Green in the blazing afternoon sunshine, and saw the cricketers still playing as if nothing had happened. Ah me! was this what brought such sad indulgent experience to Lady Denzil's eyes?—was this what made her know by instinct when anything was wrong in a house? I could not think at first what a terrible accusation it was that had been brought against her. I thought

only of her look, of her desperate snatch at the child, of her rush up the steep bank with little Mary in her arms. She could scarcely have lifted the child under ordinary circumstances—what wild despair, what longing must have stimulated her to such an effort! I put down my veil to cover my tears. Dear Lady Denzil! how sweet she was, how tender, how considerate of everybody. Blame never crossed her lips. I cannot describe the poignant aching sense of her suffering that grew upon me till I reached my own house. When I was there, out of sight of everybody, I sat down and cried bitterly. And then gradually, by degrees it broke upon me what it was that had happened—what the misery was, and the shame.

She must have done it forty years ago, as Wellman said, when she was quite young, and no doubt ignorant of the awful thing she was doing. She had done it, and she had held by it ever since—had given her child up at two years old, and had never seen him again. Good Lord! could any woman do that and live? Her child, two years old. My mind seemed to grow bewildered going over and over that fact: for evidently it was a fact. Her child—her own son.

And for forty years! To keep it all up and stand by it, and never to flinch or falter. If it is difficult to keep to a good purpose for so long, what can it be to keep by an evil one? How could she do it? Then a hundred little words she had said came rushing into my mind. And that look—the look she cast after the deserter on the road! I understood it all now. Her heart had been longing for him

all the time. She had loved her child more than other mothers love, every day of all that time.

Poor Lady Denzil! dear Lady Denzil! this was the end of all my reasonings on the matter. I went over it again and again, but I never came to any ending but this:—The thing was dreadful; but she was not dreadful. There was no change in her. I did not realize any guilt on her part. My heart only bled for the long anguish she had suffered, and for the shock she was suffering from now.

But before evening on this very same day my house was filled with people discussing the whole story. No one had heard any more than I had heard: but by this time a thousand versions of the story were afloat. Some people said she had gone astray when she was young, and had been cast off by her family, and that Sir Thomas had rescued her; and there were whispers that such stories were not so rare, if we knew all: a vile echo that always breathes after a real tragedy. And some said she was of no family, but had been the former Lady Denzil's maid; some thought it was Sir Thomas's own son that had been thus cast away; some said he had been left on the streets and no provision made for him. My neighbours went into a hundred details. Old Mr. Clifford thought it was a bad story indeed; and the rector shook his head, and said that for a person in Lady Denzil's position such a scandal was dreadful; it was such an example to the lower classes. Mrs. Damerel was still more depressed. She said she would not be surprised at anything Molly Jackson could do after this. As for Mrs. Wood, who came late in the evening, all agape to inquire

into the news, there was something like a malicious satisfaction in her face, I lost all patience when she appeared. I had compelled myself to bear what the others said, but I would not put up with her.

'Lady Denzil is my dear friend,' I broke out, not without tears; 'a great trouble has come upon her. A madwoman has been brought against her with an incredible story; and when a story is incredible people always believe it. If you want to hear any more, go to other people who were present. I can't tell you anything, and if I must say so, I won't.'

'Good gracious, Mrs. Mulgrave, don't go out of your senses!' said my visitor. 'If Lady Denzil has done something dreadful, that does not affect you!'

'But it does affect me,' I said, 'infinitely; it clouds over heaven and earth; it changes—Never mind, I cannot tell you anything about it. If you are anxious to hear, you must go to some one else than me.'

'Well, I am very glad I was not there,' said Mrs. Wood, 'with my innocent girls. I am very glad now I never made any attempt to make friends with her, though you know how often you urged me to do it. I am quite happy to think I did not yield to you now.'

I had no spirit to contradict this monstrous piece of pretence. I was glad to get rid of her anyhow; for though I might feel myself for an instant supported by my indignation, the blow had gone to my heart, and I had no strength to struggle against it. The thought of all that Lady Denzil might be suffering confused me with a

dull sense of pain. And yet things were not then at their worst with my lady. Next morning it was found that little Mary had been stolen away.

CHAPTER IV

That was a dreadful morning on the Green. After the lovely weather we had been having, all the winds and all the fiends seemed to have been unchained. It blew a hurricane during the night, and next day the Green was covered with great branches of trees which had been torn off and scattered about like wreck on a seashore. After this came rain; it poured as if the windows of heaven were opened, when Sir Thomas himself stepped in upon me like a ghost, as I sat at my solitary breakfast. These twenty-four hours had passed over him like so many years. He was haggard and ashy pale, and feeble. His very mind seemed to be confused. 'We have lost the child,' he said to me, with a voice from which all modulation and softness had gone. 'Will you come and see my wife?'

'Lost! little Mary?' I cried.

And then all his courage gave way; he sat down speechless, with his lips quivering, and bitter tears in his worn old eyes. Then he got up restless and shaking. 'Come to my wife,' he said. There was not another word exchanged between us. I put on my cloak with the hood over my head, and went with him on the moment. As we crossed the Green a sort of procession arrived, two or three great vans packed with people, with music and flags, which proceeded to discharge their contents at the 'Barley-Mow' under the soaking rain. They had come for a day's pleasure, poor

creatures, and this was the sort of day they got. The sight of them is so associated in my mind with that miserable moment, that I don't think I could forget it were I to live a hundred years. It seemed to join on somehow to the tragical breaking-up of the party on the day before. There was nothing wrong now but in the elements; yet it chimed in with its little sermon on the vanity of all things. My lady was in her own room when I entered the Lodge. The shock had struck her down, but she was not calm enough, or weak enough to go to bed. She lay on a sofa in her dressing-gown; she was utterly pale, not a touch of her sweet colour left, and her hands shook as she held them out to me. She held them out, and looked up in my face with appealing eyes, which put me in mind of little Mary's. And then, when I stooped down over her in the impulse of the moment to kiss her, she pressed my hands so in hers, that frail and thin as her fingers were, I almost cried out with pain. Mrs. Florentine, her old maid, stood close by the head of her mistress's sofa. She stood looking on very grave and steady, without any surprise, as if she knew it all.

For a few minutes Lady Denzil could not speak. And when she did, her words came out with a burst, all at once. 'Did he tell you?' she said. 'I thought you would help me. You have nobody to keep you back; neither husband nor– I said I was sure of you.'

'Dear Lady Denzil,' I said, 'if I can do anything—to the utmost of my strength–'

She held my hand fast, and looked at me as if she would look me through and through. 'That was what I said—that was what I

said!' she cried; 'you *can* do what your heart says; you can bring her back to me; my child, my little child! I never had but a little child—never that I knew!'

'I will do whatever you tell me,' I said, trying to soothe her; 'but oh! don't wear yourself out. You will be ill if you give way.'

I said this, I suppose, because everybody says it when any one is in trouble. I don't know any better reason. 'That's what I'm always telling my lady, ma'am,' said Mrs. Florentine; 'but she pays no heed to me.'

Lady Denzil gave us both a faint little smile. She knew too much not to know how entirely a matter of conventional routine it was that we should say this to her. She made a pause, and then she took my hand once more.

'I ought to tell you,' she said—'it is all true—every word. Florentine knows everything, from the first to the last. I was a poor soldier's widow, and I was destitute. I was too young to know what I was doing, and I was pretty, they said, and there were men that would have taken advantage of my simplicity. But Sir Thomas was never like that. I married him to buy a livelihood for my child; and he was very good to me. When he married me, I was a forlorn young creature, with nothing to give my helpless baby. I gave up my child, Florentine knows; and yet every day, every year of his life, I've followed him in my heart. If he had been living in my sight, I could not have known more of him. What I say is every word true, Florentine will tell you. I want you,' grasping my hand tightly, 'to tell everything to *him*.'

'To him!' said I, with a gasp of astonishment, not knowing what she meant.

'Yes,' said Lady Denzil, holding my hand fast, 'to my boy—I want you to see my boy. Tell him there has never been a day I have not followed him in my heart. All his wilfulness I have felt was my fault. I have prayed God on my knees to lay the blame on me. That day when I saw the deserter—I want you to tell him everything. I want you to ask him to give me back the child.'

I gave a cry of astonishment; an exclamation which I could not restrain. 'Can you expect it?' I said.

'Ah, yes, I expect it,' said Lady Denzil; 'not that I have any right—I expect it from his heart. Florentine will tell you everything. It is she who has watched over him. We never talked of anything else, she and I; never a day all these forty years but I have figured to myself what my darling was doing; I say my darling,' she cried as with a sharp pang, with a sudden gush of tears, 'and he is a man and a soldier, and in prison. Think of that, and think of all I have had to bear!'

I could not make any answer. I could only press her hand with a dumb sympathy. As for Mrs. Florentine, she stood with her eyes cast down, and smoothed the chintz cover with her hand, taking no part by look or word. The story was no surprise to her. She knew everything about it; she was a chief actor in it; she had no need to show any sympathy. The union between her mistress and herself was deeper than that.

'When he married this woman, I was ready to believe it would

be for his good,' said my lady, when she had recovered herself. 'I thought it was somehow giving him back what I had taken from him. I sent her presents secretly. He has been very, very wilful; and Sir Thomas was so good to him! He took his mother from him; but he gave him money, education, everything a young man wants. There are many young men,' said Lady Denzil pathetically, 'who think but little of their mothers—' and then she made a pause. 'There was young Clifford, for example,' she added, 'and the rector's brother who ran away—their mothers broke their hearts, but the boys did not care much. I have suffered in everything he suffered by; but yet if he had been here, perhaps he would not have cared for me.'

'That is not possible,' I said, not seeing what she meant.

'Oh, it is possible, very possible,' she said. 'I have seen it times without number. I have tried to take a little comfort from it. If it had been a girl, I would never, never have given her up; but a boy– That was what I thought. I don't defend myself. Let him be the judge—I want him to be the judge. That woman is a wicked woman; she has disgraced him and left him; she will bring my child up to ruin. Ask him to give me back my poor little child.'

'I will do what I can,' I said, faltering. I was pledged; yet how was I to do it? My courage failed me as I sat by her dismayed and received my commission. When she heard the tremulous sound of my voice, she turned round to me and held my hand close in hers once more.

'You can do everything,' she said. Her voice had suddenly

grown hoarse. She was at such a supreme height of emotion, that the sight of her frightened me. I kissed her; I soothed her; I promised to do whatever she would. And then she became impatient that I should set out. She was not aware of the rain or the storm. She was too much absorbed in her trouble even to hear the furious wail of the wind and the blast of rain against the windows: but had I been in her case she would have done as much for me. Before Florentine followed me with my cloak, I had made up my mind not to lose any more time. It was from her I got all the details: the poor fellow's name, and where he was, and all about him. He had been very wild, Florentine said. Sir Thomas had done everything for him; but he had not been grateful, and had behaved very badly. His wife was an abandoned woman, wicked and shameless; and he too had taken to evil courses. He had strained Sir Thomas's patience to the utmost time after time. And then he had enlisted. His regiment was in the Tower, and he was under confinement there for insubordination. Such was the brief story. 'Many a time I've thought, ma'am,' said Mrs. Florentine, 'if my lady did but know him as she was a-breaking of her heart for! If he'd been at home he'd have killed her. But all she knows is that he's her child—to love, and nothing more.'

'The Tower is a long way from our railway,' I said; 'but it does not much matter in a cab.'

'Law, ma'am, you're never going to-day?' said Florentine. But I had no intention of arguing the question with her. I went into the library to Sir Thomas to bid him good-bye. And he too was

amazed when I told him. He took my hand as his wife had done, and shook it, and looked pitifully into my face. 'It is I who ought to go,' he said. But he knew as well as I did that it was impossible for him to go. He ordered the carriage to come round for me, and brought me wine—some wonderful old wine he had in his cellar, which I knew no difference in from the commonest sherry. But it pleased him, I suppose, to think he had given me his best. And before I went away, he gave me much more information about the unfortunate man I was going to see. 'He is not bad at heart,' said Sir Thomas; 'I don't think he is bad at heart; but his wife is a wicked woman.' And when I was going away, he stooped his gray aged countenance over me, and kissed me solemnly on the forehead. When I found myself driving along the wet roads, with the rain sweeping so in the horses' faces that it was all the half-blinded coachman could do to keep them going against the wind, I was so bewildered by my own position that I felt stupid for the moment. I was going to the Tower to see Sergeant Gray, in confinement for disrespect to his superior officer—going to persuade him to exert himself to take his child from his wife's custody, and give her to his mother, whom he did not know! I had not even heard how it was that little Mary had been stolen away. I had taken that for granted, in face of the immediate call upon me. I had indeed been swept up as it were by the strong wind of emotion, and carried away and thrust forward into a position I could not understand. Then I recognized the truth of Lady Denzil's words. I had nobody to restrain me: no husband at

home to find fault with anything I might do; nobody to wonder, or fret, or be annoyed by the burden I had taken upon me. The recollection made my heart swell a little, not with pleasure. And yet it was very true. Poor Mr. Mulgrave, had he been living, was a man who would have been sure to find fault. It is dreary to think of one's self as of so little importance to any one; but perhaps one ought to think more than one does, that if the position is a dreary one, it has its benefits too. One is free to do what one pleases. I could answer to myself; I had no one else to answer to. At such a moment there was an advantage in that.

At the station I met the rector, who was going to town by the same train. 'Bless my soul, Mrs. Mulgrave,' he said, 'what a dreadful day you have chosen for travelling. I thought there was no one afloat on the world but me.'

'There was no choice, Mr. Damerel,' I said. 'I am going about business which cannot be put off.'

He was very kind: he got my ticket for me, and put me into a carriage, and did not insist that I should talk to him on the way up. He talked enough himself it is true, but he was satisfied when I said yes and no. Just before we got to town however he returned to my errand. 'If your business is anything I can do for you,' he said, 'if there is anything that a man could look after better than a lady—you know how glad I should be to be of any use.'

'Thank you,' I said. My feelings were not mirthful, but yet I could have burst out laughing. I wonder if there is really any business that a man can do better than a lady, when it happens

to be *her* business and not his? I have never got much help in that way from the men that have belonged to me. And to think of putting my delicate, desperate business into Mr. Damerel's soft, clerical hands, that had no bone in them! He got me a cab, which was something—though to be sure a porter would have done it quite as well—and opened his eyes to their utmost width when he heard me tell the coachman to go to the Tower.

What a drive it was! our thirty miles of railway was nothing to it: through all those damp, dreary, glistening London streets—streets narrow and drearily vicious; streets still more drearily respectable; desert lines of warehouses and offices; crowded thoroughfares with dreary vehicles in a lock, and dreary people crowding about surmounted with umbrellas—miles upon miles, streets upon streets, from Paddington to the Tower. I think it was the first drive of the kind I ever took, and if you can suppose me wrapped up in my waterproof cloak, a little excited about the unknown man I was going to see; trying to form my sentences, what I was to say; pondering how I should bring in my arguments best; wondering where I should have to go to find the mother and the child. Poor little Mary! after the little gleam of love and of luxury that had opened upon her, to be snatched off into the dreary world of poverty, with a violent mother whom it was evident she feared! And poor mother too! She might be violent and yet might love her child; she might be wicked and yet might love her child. To go and snatch the little creature back, at all hazards, was an act which to the popular mind would always

look like a much higher strain of virtue than dear Lady Denzil's abandonment. I could not defend Lady Denzil, even to myself; and what could I say for her to her son, who knew her not?

At least an hour was lost before I got admittance to Sergeant Gray. As it happened, by a fortunate chance, Robert Seymour was colonel of the regiment, and came to my assistance. But for that I might have failed altogether. Robert was greatly amazed by the request I made him, but of course he did what I wanted. He told me Sergeant Gray was not in prison, but simply confined to his quarters, and that he was a very strange sort of man. 'I should like to know what you can want with him,' he said. 'Yes, of course, I am dreadfully curious—men are—you know it is our weakness. You may as well tell me what you want with Gray.'

'It is nothing to laugh about,' said I; 'it is more tragic than comical. I have a message to him from his mother. And there is not a moment to lose.'

'I understand,' said Robert, 'I am to take myself off. Here is the door; but you must tell me anything you know about him when you have seen him. He is the strangest fellow in the regiment. I never can make him out.'

And in two minutes more I was face to face with Sergeant Gray.

He must have been like his father. There was not a feature in his face which recalled Lady Denzil's. He was an immensely tall, powerful man, with strong chestnut brown hair, and vigour and life in every line of his great frame. I expected to find a

prisoner partially sentimental; and I found a big man in undress marching freely about his room, with a long pipe by the fire, and his beer and glasses on the table. I had expected a refined man, bearing traces of gentleman written on him, and the fine tastes that became Lady Denzil's son. There *was* something about him, when one came to look at him a second time—but what was it? Traces of dissipation, a look of bravado, an instant standing to his arms in self-defence, whatever I might have come to accuse him of; and the insufferable coxcomb air which comes naturally to the meanest member of the household troops. Such was the rapid impression I formed as I went in. He took off his cap with an air of amazement yet assurance, but put it on again immediately. I stood trembling before this big, irreverent, unknown man. If the door had been open I think I should have run away. But as it was I had no resource.

'Mr. Gray,' I said all at once, half from cowardice, half to get it over, 'I have come to you—from your mother.'

The man actually staggered as he stood before me—he fell back and gazed at me as if I had been a ghost. 'From my—mother?' he said, and his lips seemed to refuse articulation. His surprise vanquished him; which was more than with my individual forces I could have hoped to do.

'From your mother,' I repeated. 'I have come direct from her, where she is lying ill and much shaken. She has told me all her story—and I love her dearly—that is why she sent me to you.'

All the time I was speaking he stood still and stared at

me; but when I stopped, he appeared gradually to come to himself. He brought forward, from where it stood against the wall, very deliberately, another chair, and sitting down looked at me intently. 'If she has told you all her story,' he said, 'you will know how little inducement I have to listen to anything she may say.'

'Yes,' said I, feeling not a fictitious but a real passion swelling up into my throat, 'she has told me everything, more than you can know. She has told me how for forty years—is it forty years?—she has watched over you in secret, spent her days in thinking of you, and her nights in praying for you. Ah, don't smile! if you had seen her pale and broken in all her pride, lying trembling and telling me this, it would have touched your heart.'

And I could see that it did touch his heart, being so new and unusual to him. He was not a cynical, over-educated man, accustomed to such appeals, and to believe them nonsense. And it touched him, being so unexpected. Then he made a little effort to recover himself, and the natural bravado of his character and profession. 'In all her pride!' he said bitterly. 'Yes, that's very well said; she liked her pride better than me.'

'She liked your life better than you,' said I—and heaven forgive me if I spoke like a sophist—'and your comfort. To secure bread to you and education she made that vow. When she had once made it, she had to keep it. But I tell you what she told me not three hours ago. "There has never been a day I have not followed him in my heart." That is what she said. She and her old

maid who used to see you and watch over you talked of nothing else. Fancy! you a young man growing up, taking your own way, going against the wishes of your best friends; and your mother, who dared not go to you, watching you from far off, weeping over you, praying on her knees, thinking of nothing else, talking of nothing else when she was alone and dared do it. At other times she had to go into the world to please her husband, to act as if you had no existence. And all the time she was thinking of nothing but you in her heart.'

He had got up before I came so far. He was unquestionably moved; his step got quicker and quicker. He made impatient gestures with his hands as if to put my voice away. But all the same he listened to me greedily. When I had done—and I got so excited that I was compelled to be done, for tears came into my throat and choked me—he turned to me with his face strongly swept by winds of feeling. 'Who told you?' he cried abruptly. 'Why do you come to disturb me? I was thinking nothing about my circumstances. I was thinking how I could best be jolly in such a position. What do I know about anybody who may choose to call herself my mother? Probably I never had a mother. I can do nothing for her, and she can do nothing for me.'

'You can do something for her,' I cried. 'She sent me to you to beg it of you. Sir Thomas saw how your wife was living. He saw she should not have a little girl to ruin. He brought away the child. I was there when he came home. Your mother knew in a moment who it was, though he never said a word. She rushed to

her, and fell on her knees, and cried as if her heart would break. She thought God had sent the child. Little Mary is so like her, so like her! You cannot think how beautiful it was to see them together. Look! if you don't know what your mother is, look at that face.'

He had stood as if stupefied, staring at me. When I mentioned his wife he had made an angry gesture; but his heart melted altogether when I came to little Mary. I had brought Lady Denzil's photograph with me, thinking it might touch his heart, and now I thrust it into his hand before he knew what I meant. He gave one glance at it, and then he fell back into his chair, and gazed and gazed, as if he had lost himself. He was not prepared. He had been wilful—perhaps wicked—but his heart had not got hardened like that of a man of the world. It had been outside evils he had done, outside influences that had moved him. When anything struck deep at his heart he had no armour to resist the blow. He went back upon his chair with a stride, hiding from me, or trying to hide, that he was obliged to do it to keep himself steady; he knitted his brows over the little picture as if it was hard to see it. But he might have spared himself the trouble. I saw how it was. One does not live in the world and learn men's ways for nought: I knew his eyes were filling with tears; I knew that sob was climbing up into his throat; and I did not say a word more. It was a lovely little photograph. The sun is often so kind to old women. It was my lady with all the softness of her white hair, with her gracious looks, her indulgent, benign eyes. And

those eyes were little Mary's eyes. They went straight into the poor fellow's heart. After he had struggled as long as he could, the sob actually broke out. Then he straightened himself up all at once, and looked at me fiercely; but I knew better than to pretend to hear him.

'This is nothing to the purpose,' he said; and then he stopped, and nature burst forth. 'Why did she cast me upon the world? Why did she give me up? You are a good woman, and you are her friend. Why did she cast me away?'

I shook my head, it was all I could do. I was crying, and I could not articulate. 'God knows!' I gasped through my tears. And he got up and went to the window, and turning his back on me, held up the little picture to the light. I watched no longer what he was doing. Nature was working her own way in his heart.

When he turned round at last, he came up to me and held out his hand. 'Thank you,' he said, in a way that, for the first time, reminded me of Lady Denzil. 'You have made me think less harshly about my mother. What is it she wants me to do?'

He did not put down the photograph, or give it back to me, but held it closely in his hand, which gave me courage. And then I entered upon my story. When I told him how his wife had insulted his mother, his face grew purple. I gave him every detail: how little Mary clung to my lady; how frightened she was of the passionate claimant who seized her. When I repeated her little cry, 'My lady!' a curious gleam passed over his face. He interrupted me at that point. 'Who is my lady?' he said,

with a strange consciousness. The only answer I made was to point at the photograph. It made the most curious impression on him. Evidently he had not even known his mother's name. Almost, I think, the title threw a new light for him upon all the circumstances. There are people who will say that this was from a mean feeling; but it was from no mean feeling. He saw by this fact what a gulf she had put between herself and him. He saw a certain reason in the separation which, if she had been a woman of different position, could not have existed. And there is no man living who is not susceptible to the world's opinion of the people he is interested in. He changed almost imperceptibly—unawares. He heard all the rest of my story in grave silence. I told him what my lady had said—that he was to be the judge; and henceforward it was with the seriousness of a judge that he sat and listened. He heard me out every word, and then he sat and seemed to turn it over in his mind. So far as I was concerned, that was the hardest moment of all. His face was stern in its composure. He was reflecting, putting this and that together. His mother was standing at the bar before him. And what should I do, did he decide against her? Thus I sat waiting and trembling. When he opened his lips my heart jumped to my mouth. How foolish it was! That was not what he had been thinking of. Instead of his mother at the bar, it was his own life he had been turning over in his mind. It all came forth with a burst when he began to speak: the chances he had lost; the misery that had come upon him; the shame of the woman who bore his name; and his poor little

desolate child. Then the man forgot himself, and swore a great oath. 'As soon as I am free I will go and get her, and send her to– my lady!' he said, with abrupt, half-hysterical vehemence. And then he rose suddenly and went to the window, and turned his back on me again.

I was overcome. I did not expect it so soon, or so fully. I could have thrown myself upon his neck, poor fellow, and wept. Was he the one to bear the penalties of all? sinned against by his mother in his childhood, and more dreadfully by his wife in his maturity. What had he done that the closest of earthly ties should thus be made a torment to him? When I had come to myself I rose and went after him, trembling. 'Mr. Gray,' I said, 'is there nothing that can be done for you?'

'I don't want anything to be done for me,' he cried abruptly. The question piqued his pride. 'Tell her she shall see yet that I understand the sacrifice she has made,' he said. If he spoke ironically or in honesty I cannot tell; when his mouth had once been opened the stream came so fast. 'I want to go away, that is all,' he said, with a certain heat, almost anger; 'anywhere—I don't care where—to the Mauritius, if they like, where that fever is. No fear that I should die. I have been brought up like a gentleman—it is quite true. And yet I am here. What was the use? My father was a common soldier. She– but it's no good talking; I am no credit to anybody now. If I could get drafted into another regiment, and go—to India or anywhere—you should see a difference. I swear you should see a difference!' his voice rose high in these

last words, then he paused. 'But she is old,' he said, sinking his voice; 'ten years—I couldn't *do* in less than ten years. She'll never be living then, to see what a man can do.'

'She is a woman that would make shift to live, somehow, to see her son come back,' I cried. 'Give her little Mary, and try.'

'She shall have little Mary, by God!' cried the excited man; and then he broke down, and wept. I cannot describe this scene any more. I grasped his hand when I left him, feeling as if he were my brother; he had his mother's picture held fast and hidden in his other hand. If that dear touch of natural love had come to him before! But God knows! perhaps he was only ready and open to it then.

But he could not tell me where to find the child. I had to be content with his promise that when he was free he would restore her to us. I went out from him as much shaken as if I had gone through an illness, and stole out, not to see Robert Seymour, whom I was not equal to meeting just at that moment. But the end of my mission was nearer than I thought. When I got outside there was a group of excited people about the gateway, close to which my cab was waiting me. They were discussing something which had just happened, and which evidently had left a great commotion behind. Among the crowd was a group of soldiers' wives, who shook their heads, and talked it over to each other with lowered voices. 'It's well for her she was took bad here, and never got nigh to him,' one of them said. 'He'd have killed her, I know he would! It's well for her she never got in to tempt that

man to her death.'

'It was brazen of her to come nigh him at all,' said another, 'and him so proud. She always was a shameless one. What my heart bleeds for is that poor little child.'

'Where is the child?' asked a third. 'It would be well for her, poor innocent, if the Lord was to take her too.'

I was standing stupefied, listening to them, when I heard a little cry, and the grasp of something at my dress. The cry was so feeble, and the grasp so light, that I might never have noticed it but for those women. I turned round, and the whole world swam round me for a moment. I did what Lady Denzil did—I staggered forward and fell on my knees, though this was not the soft green grass, but a stony London pavement, and clasped little Mary tight with a vehemence that would have frightened any other child; but she was not frightened. The little creature was drenched with the pitiless rain. She had been tied up in an old shawl, to hide the miserable, pretty white frock, now clogged with mud and soaked with water. Her little hat was glued to her head with the floods to which she had been exposed. I lifted my treasure wildly in my arms, as soon as I had any strength to do it, and rushed with her to my carriage. I felt like a thief triumphant; and yet it was no theft. But my eagerness aroused the suspicions of the soldiers' wives who had been standing by. They explained to me that the child was Sergeant Gray's child; that her mother had been took very bad in a fit, and had been carried off to the hospital; and that I, a stranger, had no right to interfere. I don't know what hurried

explanation I made to them; but I know that at last I satisfied their fears, and with little Mary in my arms actually drove away.

It was true, though I never could believe it. I got her as easily as if it had been the most natural thing in the world. I could not believe it, even when I held her fast and drew from her her little story. She had been taken away early, very early in the morning, when she had run to the door as soon as she was up to satisfy herself that it rained. No doubt the wretched mother had hung about the grounds all night in the storm and rain to get at the child. She had snatched up little Mary in her arms, and rushed out with her before any one was aware. The child had been dragged along the dreary roads in the rain. If the woman had really loved her, if it had been the passion of a tender mother, and not of a revengeful creature, she never would have subjected the child to this. She was wet to the skin, with pools in her little boots, and the water streaming from her dress. I took her to a friend's house and got dry clothes to put upon her. The unhappy mother had, no doubt, been out all night exposed to the storm. She was mad with rage and misery and fatigue, and probably did not feel her danger at the moment; but just as she reached the Tower to claim, building upon a common opposition to one object, her husband's support, had fallen down senseless on his very threshold as it were. Nothing indeed but madness could have led her to the man whom she had disgraced. When the surrounding bystanders saw that nothing was to be done for her, and that she would not come out of her faint, they had her carried in alarm to the hospital.

Such was the abrupt conclusion of the tale. Had I known I need not have given myself the trouble of seeing Sergeant Gray—but that, at least, was a thing which I could not find in my heart to regret.

When I took her back Lady Denzil held me in her arms, held me fast, and looked into my face, even before she listened to little Mary's call. She wanted me to tell her of her child—her own child—and I was so weak that I could not speak to her. I fell crying on her tender old bosom, like a fool, and had to be comforted, as if it could be anything to me—in comparison. I don't know afterwards what I said to her, but she understood all I meant. As for Sir Thomas he was too happy to ask any questions. The child had wound herself into his very heart. He sat with little Mary in his arms all that evening. He would scarcely allow her to be taken to bed. He went up with his heavy old step to see her sleeping safe once more under his roof, and made Wellman, with a pistol, sleep in a little room below. But little Mary was safe enough now. Her father was confined in his barrack room, with my lady's photograph in his hands, and a host of unknown softenings and compunctions in his heart. Her mother was raving wildly in the hospital on the bed from which she was never to rise. I don't know that any one concerned, except myself, thought of this strange cluster of divers fortunes, of tragic mystery and suffering, all hanging about the little angel-vision of that child. Sin, shame, misery, every kind of horror and distress, and little Mary the centre of all; how strange it was!—how terrible and

smiling and wretched is life!

It is not to be supposed that such a frightful convulsion and earthquake could pass over and leave no sign. Little Mary was very ill after her exposure, and the shadow of death fell on the Lodge. Perhaps that circumstance softened a little the storm of animadversion that rose up in the neighbourhood. For six months after, Lady Denzil, who had been our centre of society, was never seen out of her own gates. Then they went away, and were absent a whole year. It was the most curious change to everybody on the Green. For three months no one talked on any other subject, and the wildest stories were told: stories with just so much truth in them as to make them doubly wild. It was found out somehow that that wretched woman had died, and then there were accounts current that she had died in the grounds at the Lodge—on the road—in the workhouse—everywhere but the real place, which was in the hospital, where every indulgence and every comfort that she was capable of receiving had been given to her, Sir Thomas himself going to town on purpose to see that it was so. And then it was said that it was she who was Lady Denzil's child. It was a terrible moment, and one which left its mark upon everybody concerned. Sergeant Gray lost his rank, but got his wish and was drafted into another regiment going to India. I saw him again, I and poor old Mrs. Florentine.

But he did not see his mother. They were neither of them able for such a trial. 'I will come back in ten years,' he said to me. I do not know if he will. I don't know if Lady Denzil will live

so long. But I believe if she does that then for the first time she will see her son.

They returned to the Lodge two years ago, and the neighbourhood now, instead of gossiping, is very curious to know whether Lady Denzil ever means to go into society again. Everybody calls, and admires little Mary—how she has grown, and what a charming little princess she is; and they all remind my lady, with tender reproach, of those parties they enjoyed so much. 'Are we never to have any more, dear Lady Denzil?' Lucy Stoke asked the other day, kneeling at my lady's side, and caressing her soft old ivory-white hand. My lady—to whom her tender old beauty, her understanding of everybody's trouble, even the rose-tint in her cheek, have come back again—made no answer, but only kissed pretty Lucy. I don't know if she will give any more parties; but she means to live the ten years.

As for Sir Thomas he was never so happy in his life before. He follows little Mary about like an old gray tender knight worshipping the fairy creature. Sometimes I look on and cannot believe my eyes. The wretched guilty mother is dead long ago, and nobody remembers her very existence. The poor soldier has worked himself up to a commission, and may be high in rank before he comes back. If Lady Denzil had been the most tender and devoted of mothers, could things have turned out better? Is this world all a phantasmagoria and chaos of dreams and chances? One's brain reels when Providence thus contradicts all the laws of life. Is it because God sees deeper and 'understands,'

as my lady is so fond of saying? It might well be that He had a different way of judging from ours, seeing well and seeing always what we mean in our hearts.

THE STOCKBROKER AT DINGLEWOOD

CHAPTER I

Those who saw Dinglewood only after the improvements had been made could scarcely be able to form to themselves any idea of what it was before the Greshams came. I call them improvements because everybody used the word; but I cannot say I thought the house improved. It was an old-fashioned red-brick house, nothing to speak of architecturally—in the style of Kensington Palace and Kew, and the rest of those old homely royal houses. The drawing-room opened its tall narrow windows upon a little terrace, which was very green and grassy, and pleasant. I should be sorry to undertake to say why it was called Dinglewood. Mr. Coventry made very merry over the name when he had it. He used to say it was because there were no trees; but that was not strictly the case. It was quite open and bare, it is true, towards the river, which we could not see from the Green; but there was a little grove of trees which interposed between us and the house, as if to shut out Dinglewood from the vulgarity of neighbours. It was a popular house in a quiet way when the Coventrys were there. They did not give parties, or pretend to

take much trouble in the way of society, for Lady Sarah was always delicate; but when we were tired with our view on the Green, and our lawns and trees, we were always welcome on the Dinglewood terrace, where the old people were constantly to be found sitting out in the summer afternoons, Lady Sarah on her sofa, and Mr. Coventry with the newspapers and his great dog. The lawn went sloping down towards the river, which lay still and white under the sunshine, with a little green island, and a little gray house making a centre to the picture. As long as the sloping bank was lawn it was closely cut and kept like velvet; but when it became field these niceties stopped, and Lady Sarah's pet Alderney stood up to her knees in the cool clover. There was an old mulberry-tree close to the wall of the house, which shaded the sofa; and a gloomy yew on the other side did the same thing for Mr. Coventry, though he was an old Indian and a salamander, and could bear any amount of sunshine. Lady Sarah's perpetual occupation was knitting. She knitted all sorts of bright-coloured things in brilliant German wool with big ivory pins, and her husband used to read the news to her. They read all the debates together, stopping every now and then to exchange their sentiments. Lady Sarah would say with her brisk little voice, 'He might have made a better point there. I don't see that he proves his case. I don't agree with that;' and Mr. Coventry would stop and lay down the paper on his knees, and discuss it leisurely. There was no reason why they should not do it at their leisure. The best part of the summer days were spent thus by the old

couple; and the sunshine lay warm and still round them, and the leaves rustled softly, and the cool grass kept growing under their peaceful old feet. These feet tread mortal soil no longer, and all this has nothing in the world to do with my story. But it was a pretty sight in its way. They were not rich, and the furniture and carpets were very faded, and everything very different from what it came to be afterwards; yet we were all very fond of Mr. Coventry and his old wife, and the old-fashioned house was appropriate to them. I like to think of them even now.

We were all anxious, of course, after Mr. Coventry's death, to know who would buy the house (Lady Sarah could not bear it after he was gone, and indeed lived only a year after him); and when it was known that young Mr. Gresham was the purchaser, it made quite a sensation on the Green. He was the son of old Gresham, who had bought Bishop's Hope, a noble place at Cookesley, about a dozen miles off, but had made all his fortune as a stockbroker, and, they say, not even the best kind of that. His son had succeeded him in business, and had lately married somebody in his own class. He was a nice-looking young fellow enough, and had been brought up at Eton, to be sure, like so many of those people's sons; but still one felt that it was bringing in a new element to the Green. If his wife had been, as so often happens, a gentlewoman, it would have made things comparatively easy. But she was only the daughter of a mercantile man like himself, and there was great discussion among us as to what we should do when they came. Some

families made up their minds at once not to call; and some, on the other hand, declared that such rich people were sure to *fêter* the whole county, and that everybody would go to them. 'If they had only been a *little* rich, it would never have answered; but they are frightfully rich, and, of course, we must all go down on our knees,' Lottie Stoke said. She was the most eager of all to know them; for her youth was passing away, and she was not likely to marry, and the Stokes were poor. I confess I was curious myself to see how things would turn out.

Their first step however was one which took us all by surprise. Young Gresham dashed over in his Yankee waggon from Cookesley to go over the house, and the same day a charming barouche made the tour of the Green, with a very pretty young woman in it, and a lovely little girl, and a matchless tiny Skye terrier—all going to inspect Dinglewood. The arms on the carriage were quartered to the last possibility of quartering, as if they had come through generations of heiresses and gentlemen of coat-armour, and the footman was powdered and dazzling to behold. Altogether it was by far the finest equipage that had been seen in these parts for a long time. Not to speak of Lady Denzil's, or the other great people about, her Majesty's own carriage, that she drives about the neighbourhood in, was not to be compared to it. Its emblazoned panels brushed against the privet hedges in poor old Lady Sarah's drive, which was only wide enough for her little pony-carriage, and I have no doubt were scratched and spoiled; but the next thing we heard about Dinglewood was that

a flood of workmen had come down upon it, and that everything was to be changed. Young Mrs. Gresham liked the situation, but the house was *far* too small for her. My maid told me a new dining-room and drawing-room, with bed-rooms over, were to be added, and already the people had set to work. We all looked on thunderstruck while these 'improvements' were going on: he had a right to do it, no doubt, as he had bought it, but still it did seem a great piece of presumption. The pretty terrace was all cut up, and the poor old mulberry-tree perished in the changes, though it is true that they had the sense not to spoil the view. They added two wings to the old house, with one sumptuous room in each. Poor Lady Sarah's drawing-room, which was good enough for her, these millionaires made into a billiard-room, and put them all *en suite*, making a passage thus between their two new wings. I don't deny, as I have already said, that they had a perfect right to do it; but all the same it was very odd to us.

And then heaps of new furniture came down from town; the waggons that brought it made quite a procession along the road. All this grandeur and display had a bad effect upon the neighbourhood. It really looked as if these new people were already crowing over us, whose carpets and hangings were a little faded and out of fashion. There was a general movement of indignation on the Green. All this expense might be well enough, for those who could afford it, in a town-house, people said, but in the country it was vulgar and stupid. Everything was gilded and ornamented and expensive in the new Dinglewood;

Turkey carpets all over the house, and rich silk curtains and immense mirrors. Then after a while 'the family' arrived. They came with such a flutter of fine carriages as had never been seen before among us. The drive had been widened, down which Lady Sarah's old gray pony used to jog so comfortably, and there was nothing to be seen all day long but smooth, shining panels and high-stepping horses whisking in and out. In the first place there was Mr. Gresham's Yankee waggon, with a wicked-looking beast in it, which went like the wind. Then there would be a cosy brougham carrying Mrs. Gresham to Shoreton shopping, or taking out the nurse and baby for an airing; and after lunch came the pretty open carriage with the armorial bearings and the men in powder. We were too indignant to look round at first when these vehicles passed; but custom does a great deal, and one's feelings soften in spite of one's self. Of all the people on the Green, Lottie Stoke was the one who did most for the new people. 'I mean to make mamma call,' she said: and she even made a round of visits for the purpose of saying it. 'Why shouldn't we all call on them? I think it is mean to object to them for being rich. It looks as if we were ashamed of being poor; and they are sure to have quantities of people from town, and to enjoy themselves—people as good as we are, Mrs. Mulgrave: they are not so particular in London.'

'My dear Lottie,' said I, 'I have no doubt the Greshams themselves are quite as good as we are. That is not the question. There are social differences, you know.'

'Oh, yes! I know,' cried Lottie; 'I have heard of them all my life, but I don't see what the better we are, for all our nicety; and I mean to make mamma call.'

She was not so good as her word however, for Mrs. Stoke was a timid woman, and waited to see what the people would do. And in the meantime the Greshams themselves, independent of their fine house and their showy carriages, presented themselves as it were before us for approval. They walked to church on Sunday without any show, which made quite a revulsion in their favour; and she was very pretty and sweet-looking, and he was so like a gentleman that you could never have told the difference. And the end of it all was, that one fine morning Lady Denzil, without saying a word to any one, called; and after that, everybody on the Green.

I do not pretend to say that there was not a little air of newness about these young people. They were like their house, a little too bright, too costly, too luxurious. Mrs. Gresham gave herself now and then pretty little airs of wealth, which, to do her justice, were more in the way of kindness to others than display for herself. There was a kind of munificence about her which made one smile, and yet made one grow red and hot and just a little angry. It might not have mattered if she had been a princess, but it did not answer with a stockbroker's wife. She was so anxious to supply you with anything or everything you wanted. 'Let me send it,' she would say in a lavish way, whenever there was any shortcoming, and opened her pretty mouth and stared with all

her pretty eyes when her offers were declined. She wanted that delicate sense of other people's pride, which a true great lady always has. She did not understand why one would rather have one's own homely maid to wait, than borrow her powdered slave; and would rather walk than be taken up in her fine carriage. This bewildered her, poor little woman. She thought it was unkind of me in particular. 'You can't *really* prefer to drive along in the dust in your little low carriage,' she said, with a curious want of perception that my pony carriage was my own. This was the only defect I found in her, and it was a failing which leant to virtue's side. Her husband was more a man of the world, but he too had money written all over him. They were dreadfully rich, and even in their freest moment they could not get rid of it —and they were young and open-hearted, and anxious to make everybody happy. They had people down from town as Lottie prophesied—fashionable people sometimes, and clever people, and rich people. We met all kinds of radicals, and artists, and authors, and great travellers at Dinglewood. The Greshams were rather proud of their literary acquaintances indeed, which was surprising to us. I have seen old Sir Thomas look very queer when he was told he was going to meet So-and-So, who had written some famous book. 'Who is the fellow?' he said privately to me with a comical look, for he was not very literary in his tastes; —neither were the Greshams for that matter: but then, having no real rank, they appreciated a little distinction, howsoever it came; whereas the second cousin of any poor lord or good old

decayed family was more to the most of us than Shakespeare himself or Raphael; though of course it would have been our duty to ourselves to be very civil to either of those gentlemen had we met them at dinner anywhere on the Green.

But there was no doubt that this new lively household, all astir with new interests, new faces, talk and movement, and pleasant extravagance, woke us all up. They were so rich that they took the lead in many things, in spite of all that could be done to the contrary. None of us could afford so many parties. The Greshams had always something on hand. Instead of our old routine of dinners and croquet-parties, and perhaps two or three dances a year for the young people, there was an endless variety now at Dinglewood; and even if we elders could have resisted Mrs. Gresham's pretty winning ways on her own account, it would have been wicked to neglect the advantage for our children. Of course this did not apply to me, who have no children; but I was never disposed to stand very much on my dignity, and I liked the young couple. They were so fond of each other, and so good-looking, and so happy, and so ready—too ready—to share their advantages with everybody. Mrs. Gresham sent her man over with I don't know how much champagne the morning of the day when they were all coming to play croquet on my little lawn, and he wanted to know, with his mistress's love, whether he should come to help, or if there was anything else I wanted. I had entertained my friends in my quiet way before she was born, and I did not like it. Lottie Stoke happened to be with me when

the message arrived, and took the reasonable view, as she had got into the way of doing where the Greshams were concerned.

'Why should not they send you champagne?' she said. 'They are as rich as Crœsus, though I am sure I don't know much about him; and you are a lady living by yourself, and can't be expected to think of all these things.'

'My dear Lottie,' said I—and I confess I was angry—'if you are not content with what I can give you, you need not come to me. The Greshams can stay away if they like. Champagne in the afternoon when you are playing croquet! It is just like those *nouveaux riches*. They would think it still finer, I have no doubt, if they could drink pearls, like Cleopatra. Champagne!'

'They must have meant it for Cup, you know,' said Lottie, a little abashed.

'I don't care what they meant it for,' said I. 'You shall have cups of tea; and I am very angry and affronted. I wonder how they think we got on before they came!'

And then I sat down and wrote a little note, which I fear was terribly polite, and sent it and the baskets back with John Thomas, while Lottie went and looked at all the pictures as if she had never seen them before, and hummed little airs under her breath. She had taken up these Greshams in the most curious way. Not that she was an unreasonable partisan; she could see their faults like the rest of us, but she was always ready to make excuses for them. 'They don't know any better,' she would say softly when she was driven to the very extremity of her special

pleading. And she said this when I had finished my note and was just sending it away.

'But why don't they know better?' said I; 'they have had the same education as other people. He was at Eton where a boy should learn how to behave himself, even if he does not learn anything else. And she went to one of the fashionable schools—as good a school as any of you ever went to.'

'We were never at any school at all,' said Lottie with a little bitterness. 'We were always much too poor. We have never learned anything, we poor girls; whereas Ada Gresham has learned everything,' she added with a little laugh.

It was quite true. Poor little Mrs. Gresham was overflowing with accomplishments. There never was such an education as she had received. She had gone to lectures, and studied thorough bass, and knew all about chemistry, and could sympathize with her husband, as the newspapers say, and enter into all his pursuits. How fine it sounds in the newspapers! Though I was angry, I could not but laugh too—a young woman wanted an elaborate education indeed to be fit to be young Gresham's wife.

'Well,' I said, 'after all, I don't suppose she means to be impertinent, Lottie, and I like her. I don't think her education has done her much harm. Nobody could teach her to understand other people's feelings; and to be rich like that must be a temptation.'

'I should like to have such a temptation,' said Lottie, with a sudden sparkle in her eyes. 'Fancy there are four Greshams, and

they are all as rich. The girl is married, you know, to a railway man; and, by the by,' she went on suddenly after a pause, 'they tell me one of the brothers is coming here to-day.'

She said this in an accidental sort of way, but I could see there was nothing accidental about it. She drew her breath hard, poor girl, and a little feverish colour got up in her cheeks. It is common to talk of girls looking out for husbands, and even hunting that important quarry. But when now and then in desperate cases such a thing does actually come before one's eyes, it is anything but an amusing sight. The Stokes were as poor as the Greshams were rich. Everard had ruined himself, and half-killed everybody belonging to him only the year before; and now poor Lottie saw a terrible chance before her, and rose to it with a kind of tragic valour. I read her whole meaning and resolution in her face, as she said, with an attempt at a smile, these simple-sounding words; and an absolute pang of pity went through me. Poor Lottie!—it was a chance, for her family and for herself—even for poor Everard, whom they all clung to, though he had gone so far astray. What a change it would make in their situation and prospects, and everything about them! You may say it was an ignoble foundation to build family comfort upon. I do not defend it in any way; but when I saw what Lottie meant, my heart ached for her. It did not seem to me ridiculous or base, but tragic and terrible; though to be sure in all likelihood there is nobody who will think so but me.

Before Lottie left me, Mrs. Gresham came rushing over in her pretty summer dress, with her curls and ribbons fluttering in the

breeze. She came to ask me why I had been so unkind, and to plead and remonstrate. 'We have so much, we don't know what to do with it,' she said; 'Harry is always finding out some new vintage or other, and the cellars are overflowing. Why would not you use some of it? We have so much of everything we don't know what to do.'

'I would rather not, thanks,' I said, feeling myself flush; 'what a lovely day it is. Where are you going for your drive? The woods will be delicious to-day.'

'Oh, I have so much of the woods,' cried Mrs. Gresham. 'I thought of going towards Estcott to make some calls. But, dear Mrs. Mulgrave, about the Champagne?'

'It is a little too early for the heath,' said Lottie, steadily looking our visitor in the face. 'It is always cold there. What they call bracing, you know; but I don't care about being braced, the wind goes through and through one, even on a sunny day.'

'It is because you are so thin,' said Mrs. Gresham; 'I never feel the cold for my part; but I shall not drive at all to-day—I forgot—I shall go and fetch Harry from the station, and come to you, Mrs. Mulgrave: and you will not be cross, but let me send back John Thomas with—'

'My dear, I am going to give you some tea,' said I, 'and my maids can manage beautifully; the sight of a gorgeous creature like John Thomas distracts them; they can do nothing but stare at his plush and his powder. We shall be very glad to have Mr. Gresham and you.'

'But—' she began eagerly. Then she caught Lottie's look, who had made some sign to her, and stopped short, staring at me with her blue eyes. She could not make it out, and no hint short of positive demonstration could have shown her that she had gone too far. She stopped in obedience to Lottie's sign, but stared at me all the same. Her prosperity, her wealth, her habit of overcoming everything that looked in the least like a difficulty, had taken even a woman's instinct from her. She gazed at me, and by degrees her cheeks grew red: she saw she had made a mistake somehow, but even up to that moment could not tell what it was.

'Harry's brother is coming with him,' she said, a little subdued; 'may I bring him? He is the eldest, but he is not married yet. He is such a man of the world. Of course he might have married when he liked, as early as we did, there was nothing to prevent him: but he got into a fashionable set first, and then he got among the artists. He is quite what they call a Bohemian you know. He paints beautifully—Harry always consults Gerald before buying any pictures; I don't know what he does with all his money, for he keeps up no establishment, and no horses nor anything. I tell him sometimes he is an old miser, but I am sure I have no reason to say so, for he gives me beautiful presents. I should so like to bring him here.'

'Yes, bring him by all means,' said I; but I could not help giving a little sigh as I looked at Lottie, who was listening eagerly. When she saw me look at her, her face flamed scarlet, and she went in great haste to the window to hide it from Mrs. Gresham. She

saw I had found her out, and did not know what compassion was in my heart. She gave a wistful glance up into my face as she went away. 'Don't despise me!' it said. Poor Lottie! as if it ever could be lawful to do evil that good might come! They went away together, the poor girl and the rich, happy young wife. Lottie was a little the older of the two, and yet she was not old, and they were both pretty young women. They laid their heads together and talked earnestly as girls do, as they went out of my gate, and nobody could have dreamed that their light feet were entangled in any web of tragedy. The sight of the two who were so unlike, and the thought of the future which might bring them into close connection made me melancholy, I could not have told why.

CHAPTER II

We did not miss the Champagne-cup that afternoon; indeed I do not approve of such beverages for young people, and never sanction anything but tea before dinner. The Dinglewood people were doing their best to introduce these foolish extravagances among us, but I for one would not give in. Young Gresham, though he took some tea, drew his wife aside the moment after, and I heard him question her.

'It was not my fault, Harry,' she cried, not knowing I was so near. 'She sent it all back, and Lottie said I had hurt her feelings. I did not know what to do. She would not even have John Thomas to wait.'

'Nonsense!' said Harry Gresham; 'you should have insisted. We ought not to let her go to any expense. I don't suppose she has a shilling more than she wants for her own affairs.'

'But I could not help it,' said his wife.

I don't know what Lottie had said to her, but she was evidently a little frightened. As for Harry, I think he would have liked to leave a bank-note for me on one of the tables. People have told me since that it was a very bad sign, and that it is only when people are getting reckless about money that they think of throwing it away in presents; but I cannot say I have had much experience of that weakness. The new brother who had come with them was a very different kind of man. I cannot say

I took to him at first. He was not a wealthy, simple-minded, lavish creature like his brother. He was more like other people. Harry Gresham was red and white, like a girl, inclining to be stout, though he was not above thirty, and with the manners which are, or were, supposed to be specially English—downright and straightforward. Gerald was a few years older, a little taller, bronzed with the sun, and bearing the indescribable look of a man who has mixed much with the world. I looked at Lottie Stoke when I made my first observations upon the stranger, and saw that she too was looking at him with a strange expression, half of repugnance, half of wistfulness in her eyes. Lottie had not done her duty in the way of marrying, as she ought to have done, in her early youth. She had refused very good offers, as her mother was too apt to tell with a little bitterness. Now at last, when things were going so badly with the family, she had made up her mind to try; but when she did so she expected a second Harry Gresham, and not this man of the world. She looked at him as a martyr might look standing on the edge of a precipice, gathering up her strength for the plunge, shrinking yet daring. My party was quite dull for the first hour because of this pause which Lottie made on the brink, for she was always the soul of everything. When I saw her all at once rise up from the chair where she had been sitting obstinately beside old Mrs. Beresford, and go up to Mrs. Gresham, who was standing aside with her brother-in-law looking on, I knew she had made up her mind at last, and taken the plunge. An experienced rich young man of

the nineteenth century! I thought to myself she might spare her pains.

Just at that moment I saw the gorgeous figure of John Thomas appear at the end of my lawn, and a sudden flush of anger came over me. I got up to see what he wanted, thinking they had sent him back again notwithstanding my refusal. But just before I reached him I perceived that his errand was to his master, to whom he gave a telegram. Mr. Gresham tore it open at my side. He ran his eye over the message, and muttered something between his teeth, and grew red all over in indignation or trouble. Then, seeing me, he turned round, with an effort, with one of his broad smiles.

'Business even in the midst of pleasure,' he said. 'Is it not too bad?'

'If it is only business—' said I. Whenever I see one of those telegraph papers, it makes my heart beat. I always think somebody is ill or dead.

'*Only* business, by Jove!' said Harry. His voice was quite subdued, but he laughed—a laugh which sounded strange and not very natural. Then he gave himself a sort of shake, and thrust the thing into his pocket, and offered me his arm, to lead me back to my place. 'By the by,' he said, 'I am going to quarrel with you, Mrs. Mulgrave. When we are so near why don't you let us be of some use to you? It would give the greatest pleasure both to Ada and me.'

'Oh, thanks; but indeed I don't want any help,' I cried, abruptly

coming to a sudden stop before Lady Denzil's chair.

'You are so proud,' he said with a smile, and so left me to plunge into the midst of the game, where they were clamouring for him. He played all the rest of the afternoon, entering into everything with the greatest spirit; and yet I felt a little disturbed. Whether it was for Lottie, or whether it was for Harry Gresham I could not well explain to myself; a feeling came over me like the feeling with which one sometimes wakes in the morning without any reason for it—an uneasy restless sense that something somehow was going wrong.

The Greshams were the last of my party to go away, and I went to the gate with them, as I had a way of doing, and lingered there for a few minutes in the slanting evening light. It was nearly seven o'clock, but they did not dine till eight, and were in no hurry. She wore a very pretty dress—one of those soft pale grays which soil if you look hard at them—and had gathered the long train over her arm like a figure in a picture; for though she was not very refined, Ada Gresham was not a vulgar woman to trail her dress over a dusty road. She had taken her husband's arm as they went along the sandy brown pathway, and Gerald on the other side carried her parasol and leant towards her to talk. As I looked at them I could not but think of the strange differences of life: how some people have to get through the world by themselves as best they may, and some have care and love and protection on every side of them. These two would have kept the very wind from blowing upon Ada; they were ready to shield her from every

pain, to carry her in their arms over any thorns that might come in her way. The sunshine slanted sideways upon them as they went along, throwing fantastic broken shadows of the three figures on the hedgerow, and shining right into my eyes. I think I can see her now leaning on her husband's arm, looking up to his brother, with the pretty sweep of the gray silk over her arm, the white embroidered skirts beneath, and the soft rose-ribbons that caught the light. Poor Ada! I have other pictures of her, beside this one, in my memory now.

Next day we had a little discussion upon the new brother, in the afternoon when my visitors looked in upon me. We did not confine ourselves to that one subject. We diverged, for instance, to Mrs. Gresham's toilette, which was so pretty. Lottie Stoke had got a new bonnet for the occasion; but she had made it herself, and though she was very clever, she was not equal to Elise.

'Fancy having all one's things made by Elise!' cried Lucy the little sister, with a rapture of anticipation. 'If ever I am married, nobody else shall dress *me*.'

'Then you had better think no more of curates,' said some malicious critic, and Lucy blushed. It was not her fault if the curates amused her. They were mice clearly intended by Providence for fun and torture. She was but sixteen and meant no harm, and what else could the kitten do?

Then a great controversy arose among the girls as to the claims of the new brother to be called handsome. The question was hotly discussed on both sides, Lottie alone taking no part in the debate.

She sat by very quietly, with none of her usual animation. Nor did she interpose when the Gresham lineage and connection—the little cockney papa who was like a shabby little miser, the mother who was large and affable and splendid, a kind of grand duchess in a mercantile way—were taken in hand. Lottie could give little sketches of them all when she so pleased; but she did not please that day.

'This new one does not look like a nobody,' said one of my visitors. 'He might be the Honourable Gerald for his looks. He is fifty times better than Mr. Gresham, though Mr. Gresham is very nice too.'

'And he has such a lovely name!' cried Lucy. 'Gerald Gresham! Any girl I ever heard of would marry him just for his name.'

'They have all nice names,' said the first speaker, who was young too, and attached a certain weight to this particular. 'They don't sound like mere rich people. They might be of a good old family to judge by their names.'

'Yes; she is Ada,' said Lucy, reflectively, 'and he is Harry, and the little boy's name is Percy. But Gerald is the darling! Gerald is the one for me!'

The window was open at the time, and the child was talking incautiously loud, so that I was not much surprised, for my part, when a peal of laughter from outside followed this speech, and Ada, with her brother-in-law in attendance, appeared under the veranda. Of course Lucy was covered with confusion; but her

blushes became the little creature, and gave her a certain shy grace which was very pretty to behold. As for Lottie, I think the contrast made her paler. Looking at her beautiful refined head against the light, nobody could help admiring it; but she was not round and dimpled and rosy like her little sister. After a while Gerald Gresham managed to get into the corner where Lottie was, to talk to her; but his eyes sought the younger creature all the same. A man has it all his own way when there is but one in the room. He was gracious to all the girls, like a civilized English sultan; but they were used to that, poor things, and took it very good-naturedly.

'It is not his fault if he is the only man in the place,' said Lucy; and she was not displeased, though her cheeks burned more hotly than ever when he took advantage of her incautious speech.

'I must not let you forget that it is Gerald who is the darling,' he said laughing. Of course it was quite natural, and meant nothing, and perhaps no one there but Lottie and myself thought anything of this talk; but it touched her, poor girl, with a certain mortification, and had a curious effect upon me. I could not keep myself from thinking, Would it be Lucy after all? After her sister had made up her mind in desperation; after she had screwed her courage to the last fatal point; after she had consciously committed herself and compromised her maiden up-rightness, would it be Lucy who would win the prize without an effort? I cannot describe the effect it had upon me. It made me burn with indignation to think that Lottie Stoke was putting forth all her

powers to attract this stranger—this man who was rich, and could buy her if he pleased; and, at the same time, his looks at Lucy filled me with the strangest sense of disappointment. I ought to have been glad that such humiliating efforts failed of success, and yet I was not. I hated them, and yet I could not bear to think they would be in vain.

'And Harry has gone to town again to-day,' said Ada, with a pout of her pretty mouth, 'though he promised to stay and take me up the river. They make his life wretched with those telegrams and things. I ask him, What is the good of going on like this, when we have plenty of money? And then he tells me I am a little fool and don't understand.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.