МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

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Содержание

Margaret Oliphant
Ombra

Simon. … 'Your tale, my friend,
Is made from nothing, and of nothings spun—
Foam on the ocean, hoar-frost on the grass,
The gossamer threads that sparkle in the sun
Patterned with morning dew—things that are born
And die, are come and gone, blossom and fade
Ere day mature has drawn one sober breath.'

Philip. 'Tis so; and so is life; and so is youth;
Foam, frost, and dew; what would you? Maidens call
That filmy gossamer the Virgin's threads,
And virgins' lives are woven of threads like those.'

The Two Poor Maidens.

CHAPTER I

Katherine Courtenay was an only child, and a great heiress; and both her parents had died before she was able to form any clear idea of them. She was brought up in total ignorance of the natural life of childhood—that world hemmed in by the dear faces of father and mother, brother and sister, which forms to most girls the introductory chapter into life. She never knew it. She lived in Langton-Courtenay—with her nurse first, and then with her governess, the centre of a throng of servants, in the immense desolate house. Even in these relationships the lonely child did not find the motherhood which lonely children so often find in the care of some pitying, tender-hearted stranger. Her guardian, who was her father's uncle, an old man of the world, was one of those who distrust old servants, and accept from their inferiors nothing more than can be paid for. He had made up his mind from the beginning that little Kate should not be eaten up by locusts, as he said—that she should have no kind of retainers about her, flattering her vanity with unnecessary affection and ostentatious zeal; but only honest servants (as honest, he would add, as they ever are), who expected nothing but the day's wages for the day's work. To procure this, he allowed no one to remain long with his ward. Her nurse was changed half a dozen times during the period in which she required such a guardian; and her governess had shared the same fate. She had never been allowed to attach herself to one more than another. When any signs of feeling made themselves apparent, Mr. Courtenay sent forth his remorseless decree. 'Kate shall never be any woman's slave, nor any old servant's victim, if I can help it,' he said. He would have liked, had that been practicable, to turn her into a public school, and let her 'find her level,' as boys do; but as that was not practicable, he made sure, at least, that no sentimental influences should impair his nursling's independence and vigour. Thus the alleviations which natural sympathy and pity might have given her, were lost to Kate. Her attendants were afraid to love her; her often-changed instructresses had to shut their hearts against the appeal of compassion, as well as the appeal made by the girl's natural attractiveness. She had to be to them as princesses are but rarely to their teachers and companions—a half-mistress, half-pupil. An act of utter self-renunciation was required of them before ever they set foot in Langton-Courtenay. Mr. Courtenay himself made the engagement, and prescribed its terms. He paid very liberally; and he veiled his insolence under the garb of perfect politeness. 'I do not wish Miss Courtenay to make any friends out of her own class,' he would say. 'I shall do my utmost to make the temporary connection between my niece and you advantageous to yourself, Miss –. But I must exact, on the other side, that there shall be no sentimental bonds formed, no everlasting friendships, no false relationship. I have seen the harm of such things, and suffered from it. Therefore, if these should be your ideas–'

'You wanted a governess, I heard, and I applied for the situation—I never thought of anything more,' said quickly, with some offence, the irritated applicant.

'Precisely,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'With this understanding everything may be decided at once. I am happy to have met with a lady who understands my meaning.' And thus the bargain would be made. But, as it is natural to suppose, the ladies who were willing to take service under these terms, were by no means the highest of their class. Sometimes it would happen that Mr. Courtenay received a sharp rebuff in these preliminary negotiations. 'I trust, of course, that I shall grow fond of my pupil, and she of me,' said one stouter-hearted woman, for example. And the old Squire made her a sarcastic bow.

'Quite unnecessary—wholly unnecessary, I assure you,' he said.

'Then there is nothing more to be said about it,' was the reply; and this applicant—whose testimonials were so high, and were from such 'good people' (meaning, of course, from a succession of duchesses, countesses, and families of renown), that Mr. Courtenay would, he confessed, have given 'any money' to secure her services—got up with impatience, and made him a curtsey which would, could she have managed it, have been as sarcastic as his bow, but which, as it turned out, was

only an agitated and awkward obeisance, tremulous with generous rage: 'such an arrangement would be quite impossible to me.'

And so poor Kate missed a woman who might have been a kind of secondary mother to the forlorn child, and acquired a mercenary dragon instead, who loved nobody, and was incapable of attracting love.

The consequences of this training were not, perhaps, exactly such as might have been expected. Kate's high spirits and energetic temper retained a certain ascendancy over her circumstances; her faults were serious and deep-rooted, but on the surface she had a *gaieté du cœur*—an impulsive power of sympathy and capacity for interesting herself in other people, which could not but be potent for good or evil in her life. It developed, however, in the first place, into a love of interference, and consequently of gossip, which would have alarmed anyone really concerned for her character and happiness. She was kept from loving or from being loved. She was arbitrarily fixed among strangers, surrounded with faces which were never permitted to become familiar, defrauded of all the interests of affection; and her lively mind avenged itself by a determination to know everything and meddle with everything within her reach. Kate at fifteen was not mournful, despondent, or solitary, as might have been looked for; on the contrary, she was the very type of activity, a little inquisitive despot, the greatest gossip and busy-body within a dozen miles of Langton-Courtenay. The tendrils of her nature, which ought to have clung firm and close around some natural prop, trailed all abroad, and caught at everything. Nothing was too paltry for her, and nothing too grand. She had the audacity to interfere in the matter of the lighted candles on the altar, when the new High-Church Rector of Langton first came into power; and she interfered remorselessly to take away Widow Budd's snuff, when it was found out that the reason she assigned for wanting it—the state of her eyes—was a shameful pretence. Kate did not shrink from either of these bold practical assaults upon the liberty of her subjects. She would no doubt have inquired into the Queen's habits, and counselled, if not required some change in them, had that illustrious lady paid a visit to Langton-Courtenay. This was how Nature managed itself for her especial training. She could no more be made unsympathetic, unenergetic, or deprived of her warm interest in the world, than she could be made sixty. But all these good qualities could be turned into evil, and this was what her guardian managed to do. It did not occur to him to watch over her personally during her childhood, and therefore he was unconscious of the exact progress of affairs.

Old Mr. Courtenay was totally unlike the child whom he had undertaken to train. He did not care a straw for his fellow-creatures; they took their way, and he took his, and there was an end of the matter. When any great calamity occurred, he shrugged his shoulders, and comforted himself with the reflection that it must be their own fault. When, on the contrary, there was joy and rejoicing, he took his share of the feast, and reflected, with a smile, that wise men enjoy the banquets which fools make. To put yourself out of the way for anything that might happen, seemed to him the strangest, the most incomprehensible folly. And when he made up his mind to save the young heiress of his house from the locusts, and to keep her free from all connections or associations which might be a drag upon her in future times, he had been honestly unconscious that he was doing wrong to Nature. Love!—what did she want with love?—what was the good of it? Mr. Courtenay himself got on very well without any such frivolous imaginary necessity, and so, of course, would Kate. He was so confident in the wisdom, and even in the naturalness of his system, that he did not even think it worth his while to watch over its progress. Of course it would come all right. Why should he trouble himself about the details?—to keep fast to this principle gave him quite enough trouble. Circumstances, however, had occurred which made it expedient for him to visit Langton-Courtenay when Kate completed her fifteenth year. New people had appeared on the scene, who threatened to be a greater trouble to him, and a greater danger for Kate, than even the governesses; and his sense of duty was strong enough to move him, in thus far, at least, to personal interference on his ward's behalf.

At fifteen Kate Courtenay was the very impersonation of youthful beauty, vigour, and impetuous life. She seemed to dance as she walked, to be eloquent and rhetorical when she spoke,

out of the mere exuberance of her being. Her hair, which was full of colour, chestnut-brown, still fell in negligent abundance about her shoulders; not in stiff curls, after the old mode, nor *crêpé*, according to the new, but in one undulating, careless flow. Though she was still dressed in the sackcloth of the school-room, there was an air of authoritative independence about her, more imposing a great deal than was that garb of complete womanhood, the 'long dress,' to which she looked forward with awe and hope. Her figure was full for her age, yet so light, so well-formed, so free and rapid in movement, that it had all the graceful effect of the most girlish slenderness. Her voice was slightly high-pitched —not soft and low, as is the ideal woman's—and she talked for three people, pouring forth her experiences, her recollections, her questions and remarks, in a flood. It was not quite ladylike, more than one unhappy instructress of Kate's youth had suggested; but there seemed no reason in the world why she should pay any attention to such a suggestion. 'If it is natural for me to talk so, why should I try to talk otherwise? Why should I care what people think? You may, Miss Blank, because they will find fault with you, and take away your pupils, and that sort of thing; but nobody can do anything to me.' This was Kate's vindication of her voice, which rang through all Langton-Courtenay clear as a bell, and sweet enough to hear, but imperative, decisive, high-pitched, and unceasing. When her uncle saw her, his first sensation was one of pleasure. She was waiting for him on the step before the front door, the sunshine surrounding her with a golden halo, made out of the stray golden luminous threads in her hair.

'How do you do, uncle?' she called out to him as soon as he appeared. 'I am so glad you have made up your mind to come at last. It is always a change to have you here, and there are so many things I want to talk of. You have taken the fly from the station, I see, though the carriage went for you half-an-hour ago. That is what I am always telling you, Giles, you are continually half-an-hour too late. Uncle, mind how you get down. That fly-horse is the most vicious thing! She'll go off when you have one foot to the ground, if you don't mind. I told old Mrs. Sayer to sell her, but these people never will do what they are told. I am glad to see you, Uncle Courtenay. How do you do?'

'A little bewildered with my journey, Kate—and to find you a young lady receiving your guests, instead of a shy little girl running off when you were spoken to.'

'Was I ever shy?' said Kate, with unfeigned wonder. 'What a very odd thing! I don't remember it. I thought I had always been as I am now. Tell Mrs. Sayers, Tom, that I have heard something I don't like about one of the people at Glenhouse, and that I am coming to speak to her to-morrow. Uncle, will you have some tea, or wine, or anything, or shall I take you to your room! Dinner is to be at seven. I am so glad you have come to make a change. I *hate* dinner at two. It suits Miss Blank's digestion, but I am sure I hate it, and now it shall be changed. Don't you think I am quite grown up, Uncle Courtenay? I am as tall as you.'

He was little, dried-up, shrivelled—a small old man; and she a young Diana, with a bloom which had still all the freshness of childhood. Uncle Courtenay felt irritated when she measured her elastic figure beside the stooping form of his old age.

'Yes, yes, yes!' he said, pettishly. 'Grown up, indeed! I should think you were. But stop this stream of talk, for heaven's sake, and moderate your voice, and take me in somewhere. I don't want to have your height discussed among your servants, nor anything else I may have to say.'

'Oh! for that matter, I do not mind who hears me talk,' said Kate. 'Why should I? Nobody, of course, ever interferes with me. Come into the library, uncle. It is nice and cool this hot day. Did you see anyone in the village as you came up? Did you notice if there was anyone at the Rectory? They are curious people at the Rectory, and don't take the trouble to make themselves at all agreeable. Miss Blank thinks it very strange, considering that I am the Lady of the Manor, and have a right to their respect, and ought to be considered and obeyed. Don't you think, uncle–'

'Obeyed!' he said, with a laugh which was half amusement, and half consternation. 'A baby of fifteen is no more the Lady of the Manor than Miss Blank is. You silly child, what do you mean?'

‘I am not a child,’ said Kate, haughtily. ‘I am quite aware of my position. I may not be of age yet, but that does not make much difference. However, if you are tired, uncle, as I think you are by your face, I won’t bore you with that, though it is one of my grievances. Should you like to be left alone till dinner? If you would let me advise you, I should say lie down, and have some eau-de-Cologne on a handkerchief, and perhaps a cup of tea. It is the best thing for worry and headache.’

‘In heaven’s name, how do you know?’

‘Perfectly well,’ said Kate, calmly. ‘I have made people do it a hundred times, and it has always succeeded. Perfect quiet, uncle, and a wet handkerchief on your forehead, and a cup of my special tea. I will tell Giles to bring you one, and a bottle of eau-de-Cologne; and if you don’t move till the dressing bell rings, you will find yourself quite refreshed and restored. Why, I have made people do it over and over again, and I have never known it to fail.’

CHAPTER II

Miss Courtenay, of Langton-Courtenay, had scarcely ever in her life been promoted before to the glories of a late dinner. She had received no visitors, and the house was still under school-room sway, as became her age, consequently this was a great era to Kate. She placed herself at the head of the table, with a pride and delight which neither her cynical old uncle nor her passive governess had the least notion of. The occurrence was trifling to them, but to her its importance was immense. Miss Blank, who was troubled by fears of being in the way—fears which her charge made no effort to enlighten—and whose digestion, besides, was feeble, preferred to have the usual two o'clock dinner, and to leave Kate alone to entertain her uncle. This dinner had been the subject of Kate's thoughts for some days. She had insisted on the production of all the plate which the little household at Langton had been permitted to retain; she had the table decked with a profusion of flowers. She had not yet discretion enough to know that a small table would have been in better taste than the large one, seated at opposite ends of which her guardian and herself were as if miles apart. They could not see each other for the flowers; they could scarcely hear each other for the distance; but Kate was happy. There was a certain grown-up grandeur, even in the discomfort. As for Mr. Courtenay, he was extremely impatient. 'What a fool the girl must be!' he said to himself; and went on to comment bitterly upon the popular fallacy which credits women with intuitive good taste and social sense, at least. When he made a remark upon the long distance that separated them, Kate cheerfully suggested that he should come up beside her. She took away his breath by her boldness; she deafened him with her talk. Behind that veil of flowers which concealed her young, bright figure, she poured forth the monologue of a rural gossip, never pausing to inquire if he knew or cared anything about the objects of it. And of course Mr. Courtenay neither knew nor cared. His own acquaintance with the house of his father had ended long before she was born, before her father had succeeded to the property; and he never had been interested in the common people who formed Kate's world. Then it was very apparent to Kate's uncle that the man who waited (and waited very badly) grinned without concealment at his young mistress's talk; and that Kate herself was not indifferent to the *fond* of appreciation thus secured to her. It would be impossible to put into words the consternation which filled him as he ate an indifferent dinner, and listened to all this. He had succeeded so far that no one governess nor maid had secured dominion over the mind of the future sovereign of Langton; but at what a cost had he secured it! 'You seem to interest yourself a great deal about all these people,' he said at length.

'Yes, Uncle Courtenay, of course I do. I have nobody else to take an interest in,' said Kate. 'But the people at the Rectory are very disagreeable. If the living should fall vacant in my time, it certainly shall never go to one of them. The second son, Herbert, whom they call Bertie, is going in for the Church, and I suppose they think he will succeed his father; but I am sure he never shall, if that happens in my time. There are two daughters, Edith and Minnie; and I don't think Mrs. Hardwick can be a good manager, for the girls are always so badly dressed; and you know, Uncle Courtenay, it is a very good living. I have felt tempted a dozen times to say, "Why don't you clothe the girls better?" If they had been farmers, or anything of that sort, I should at once–'

'And how do the farmers like your interference, Kate?'

'My interference, Uncle Courtenay! Why, of course one must speak if one sees things going wrong. But to return to the Hardwicks. I did write, you know, about the candles on the altar–'

'Why, Kate, I did not know how universal you were,' said her uncle, half-amused—'theological, too?'

'I don't know about theology; but burning candles in daylight, when there was not a bit of darkness—not a fog, even—what is the good of it? I thought I had a right to let Mr. Hardwick know. It is my parish and my tenantry, and I do not mean to give them up. Isn't the Queen the head of

the Church?—then, of course, I am the head of Langton-Courtenay, and it is flat rebellion on the Rector's part. What do you mean, Uncle Courtenay?—are you laughing at me?'

'Why, Kate, your theories take away my breath,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'Don't you think this is going a little too far? You cannot be head of the Church in Langton-Courtenay without interfering with Her Majesty's prerogative. She is over all the country, you know. You don't claim the power of the sword, I hope, as well–'

'What is the power of the sword, uncle? I should claim anything that I thought belonged to me,' cried Kate.

'But you would not hold a court, I hope, and erect a gallows in the courtyard,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'I suppose our ancestor, Sir Bernard had the right, but I would not advise you to claim it, my dear. Kate, now that the man is gone, I must tell you that I think you have been very impertinent to the Rector, and nothing but the fact that you are a baby, and don't know what you're doing–'

'A baby!—and impertinent!—uncle!—I!'

'Yes, you—though you think yourself such a great personage, you must learn to remember that you are a child, my dear. I will make a point of calling on the Rector to-morrow, and I hope he will look over your nonsense. But remember there must be no more of it, Kate.'

'Don't speak to me like that,' she said, half weeping. 'I will not be so spoken to. Uncle, you are only my guardian, and it is I who am the mistress here.'

'You little fool!' he said, under his breath; and then a sudden twinge came over him—a doubt whether he had been as wise as he thought he had been in the training of this girl. He was not the sort of man, so common in the world, to whom cynicism in every other respect is compatible with enthusiasm in respect to himself. He was a universal cynic. He distrusted himself as well as other people, and consequently he did not shut his eyes to the fact that a mistake had been made. While Kate dried her eyes hastily, and tried her best to maintain her dignity, and overcome those temptations towards the hysterical which prevented her from making an immediate reply, her uncle was so candid as to stop short, as it were, in his own course, and review a decision he had just made. He had not known Kate when he made it; now that he saw her in all her force and untamableness, with all those wonderful ideas of her position, and determination to interfere with every one, he could not but think that it might be wise to reconsider the question. What should he do with this unmanageable girl?—good heavens! what could he do with her? Whereas, here was a new influence offering itself, which perhaps might do all that was wanted. Mr. Courtenay pondered while Kate recovered some appearance of calm. She had never (she said to herself) been so spoken to in her life. She did not understand it—she would not submit to it! And when the hot mist of tears dried up from her eyes, Kate looked from behind the flowers at Mr. Courtenay, with her heart beating high for the conflict, and yet felt daunted—she could not tell how—and did not know what to do. She would have liked to rush out of the room, slamming the door behind her; but in that case she would have lost at once her dignity and the strawberries, which are tempting at fifteen. She would not let him see that he had beaten her; and yet—how could she begin the struggle?—what could she say? She sat and peeped at him from behind the vase of flowers which stood in the centre of the table, and was silent for five whole minutes in her bewilderment—perhaps longer than she ever had been silent before in her life. Finally, it was Mr. Courtenay who broke the silence—a fact which of itself gave him a vast advantage over her.

'Kate,' he said, 'I have listened to you for a long time. I want you now to listen to me for a little. You have heard of your aunt Anderson? She is your mother's only sister. She has been—I suppose you know?—for a long time abroad.'

'I don't know anything about her,' said Kate, pouting. This was not entirely true, for she had heard just so much of this unknown relation as a few rare letters received from her could tell—letters which left no particular impression on Kate's mind, except the fact that her correspondent signed herself 'Your affectionate Aunt,' and which had ceased for years. Kate's mother had not been born

on the Langton-Courtenay level. She had been the daughter of a solicitor, whose introduction into the up-to-that-moment spotless pedigree of the Courtenays lay very heavy on the heart of the family. Kate knew this fact very well, and it galled her. She might have forgiven her mother, but she felt a visionary grudge against her aunt, and why should she care to know anything about her? This sense of inferiority on the part of her relation kept her silent, as well as the warm and lively force of temper which dissuaded her from showing any interest in a matter suggested by her uncle. If she could but have kept up so philosophical a way of thinking! But the fact was, that no sooner had she answered than her usual curiosity and human interest in her fellow-creatures began to tug at Kate's heart. What was he going to tell her about her aunt Anderson? Who was she? What was she? What manner of woman? Was she poor, and so capable of being made Kate's vassal; or well off, and likely to meet her niece on equal terms? She had to shut up her lips very tight, lest some of these many questions should burst from them. And if Uncle Courtenay had but known his advantage, and kept silent a little, she would have almost gone on her knees to him for further information. But Mr. Courtenay did not understand his advantage, and went on talking.

'Her husband was British Consul somewhere or other in Italy. They have been all over the Continent, in one place and another; but he died a year ago, and now they have come home. She wishes to see you, Kate. I have got a letter from her—with a great deal of nonsense in it—but that by the way. There is a great deal of nonsense in all women's letters! She wants to come here, I suppose; but I don't choose that she should come here.'

'Why, Uncle Courtenay?' said Kate, forgetting her wrath in the excitement of this novelty.

'It is unnecessary to enter into my reasons. When you are of age you can have whom you please; but in the meantime I don't intend that this house should be a centre of meddling and gossip for the whole neighbourhood. So the aunt shan't come. But you can go and visit her for a few weeks, if you choose, Kate.'

'Why shouldn't my aunt come if I wish it?' cried Kate, furious. 'Uncle Courtenay, I tell you again you are only my guardian, and Langton-Courtenay belongs to *me*!'

'And I reply, my dear, that you are fifteen, and nothing belongs to you,' said the old man, with a smile. 'It is hard to repress so much noble independence, but still that is the truth.'

'You are a tyrant—you are a monster, Uncle Courtenay! I won't submit to it! I will appeal to some one. I will take it into my own hands.'

'The most sensible thing you can do, in the meantime, is to retire to your own room, and try to bring yourself back to common sense,' said Mr. Courtenay, contemptuously. 'Not another word, Kate. Where is your governess, or your nurse, or whoever has charge of you? Little fool! do you think, because you rule over a pack of obsequious servants, that you can manage me.'

'I will not be your slave! I will never, never be your slave!' cried Kate, springing to her feet, and raising her flushed face over the flowers. Her eyes blazed, her little rosy hand was clenched so tight that the soft knuckles were white. Her lips were apart, her breath burned, her soul was on fire. Quite ready for a fight, ready to meet any enemy that might come against her—breathing fire and flame!

'Pho! pho! child, don't be a fool!' said Mr. Courtenay; and he calmly rang the bell, and ordered Giles to remove the wine to a small table which stood in the window, where he removed himself presently, without taking the least notice of her.

Kate stood for a moment, like a young goddess of war, thunder-stricken by the calm of her adversary; and then rushed out, flinging down her napkin, and dragging a corner of the table-cloth, so as to upset the great dish of ruby strawberries which she had not tasted. They fell on the floor like a heavy shower, scattering over all the carpet; and Kate closed the door after her with a *thud* which ran through the whole house. She paused a moment in the hall, irresolute. Poor untrained, unfriended child, she had no one to go to, to seek comfort from. She knew how Miss Blank would receive her passion; and she was too proud to acknowledge to her maid, Maryanne, how she had been beaten. She caught the broad-brimmed garden-hat which hung in the hall, and a shawl to wrap herself in, and

rushed out, a forlorn, solitary young creature, into the noble park that was her own. There was not a child in the village but had some one to fly to when it had received a blow; but Kate had no one—she had to calm herself down, and bear her passion and its consequences alone. She rushed across the park, forgetting even that her uncle Courtenay could see her from the window, and unconscious of the chuckle with which he perceived her discomfiture. 'Little passionate idiot!' he said to himself, as he sipped his wine. But yet perhaps had he known what was to come of it, Mr. Courtenay would not have been quite so contented with himself. He had forgotten all about the feelings and sufferings of her age, if indeed he had ever known them. He did not care a jot for the mortification and painful rage with which he had filled her. 'Serve her right!' he would have said. He was old himself, and far beyond the reach of such tempests; and he had no pity for them. But all the more he thought with a sense of comfort of this Mrs. Anderson, with her plebeian name, and sentimental anxiety about 'the only child of a beloved sister.' The beloved sister herself had not been very welcome in Langton-Courtenay. The Consul's widow should never be allowed to enter here, that was very certain; but, still, use might be made of her to train this ungovernable child.

CHAPTER III

Kate Courtenay rushed across the park in a passion of mortification and childish despair, and fled as fast as her swift feet could carry her to a favourite spot—a little dell, through which the tiniest of brooks ran trickling, so hidden under the trees and copse that even Summer never quite dried it up. There was a little semi-artificial waterfall, just where the brook descended into the depths of this little dell. In Spring it was a wilderness of primroses and violets; and so long as wild flowers would blow, they were always to be found in this sunny nook. The only drawback was that a footpath ran within sight of it, and that the village had an often-contested right of way skirting the bank. Kate had issued arbitrary orders more than once that no one was to be suffered to pass; but the law was too strong for Kate, as it had been for her grandfathers before her; and, on the whole, perhaps the occasional passenger had paid for his intrusion by the additional liveliness he had given to the landscape. It was one of Kate's 'tricks,' her governess once went so far as to say, to take her evening walk here, in order to detect the parties of lovers with whom this footway was a favourite resort. All this, however, was absent from Kate's mind now. She rushed through the trees and bushes, and threw herself on the sunny grass by the brookside; and at fifteen passion is not silent, as it endeavours to be at a more advanced age. Kate did not weep only, but cried, and sobbed, and made a noise, so that some one passing by in the footway on the other side of the bushes was arrested by the sound, and drew near.

It is hard to hear sounds of weeping in a warm Summer evening, when the air is sweet with sounds of pleasure. There is something incongruous in it, which wounds the listener. The passenger in this case was young and tender-hearted, and he was so far like Kate herself, that when he heard sounds of trouble, he felt that he had a right to interfere. He was a clergyman's son, and in the course of training to be a clergyman too. His immediate destination was, as soon as he should be old enough to be ordained, the curacy of Langton-Courtenay, of which his father was Rector. Whether he should eventually succeed his father was of course in the hands of Providence and Miss Courtenay; he had not taken his degree yet, and was at least two years off the time when he could take orders; but still the shadow of his profession was upon him, and, in right of that, Herbert Hardwick felt that it was his business to interfere.

What he saw, when he looked through the screen of trees, was the figure of a girl in a light Summer dress, half seated, half lying on the grass. Her head was bent down between her hands; and even had this not been the case, it is probable Bertie, who had scarcely seen Miss Courtenay, would not have recognised her. Of course, had he taken time to think, he must have known at once that nobody except Kate, or some visitor at the Hall, was likely to be there; but he never took time to think. It was not his way. He stepped at once over the fence, walking through the brushwood, and strode across the brook without pause or hesitation.

'What is the matter?' he said, in his boyish promptitude. 'Have you hurt yourself?—have you lost your way?—what is wrong?'

For a moment she took no notice of him, except to turn her back more completely on him. Herbert had sisters, and he was not so ceremonious to young womankind generally as might otherwise have happened. He laid his hand quite frankly on her shoulder, and knelt down beside her on the grass. 'No,' he said, with a certain authority, 'my poor child, whoever you may be, I can't leave you to cry your eyes out. What is the matter? Look up and tell me. Have you lost yourself? If you will tell me where you have come from, I will take you home. Or have you hurt yourself? Now, pray don't be cross, but answer, and let me know what I can do.'

Kate had almost got her weeping-fit over, and surprise had wakened a new sentiment in her mind. Surprise and curiosity, and the liveliest desire to know whose the voice was, and whose the hand laid so lightly, yet with a certain authority, upon her shoulder. She made a dash with her handkerchief across her face to clear away the tears, and then she suddenly turned round and confronted her

comforter. She looked up at him with tears hanging on her eyelashes, and her face wet with them, yet with all the soul of self-will which was natural to her looking out of her eyes.

'Do you know,' she said hastily, 'that you are trespassing? This is private property, and you have no right to be here.'

The answer which Bertie Hardwick made to this was, first, an astonished stare, and then a burst of laughter. The sudden change from sympathy and concern to amusement was so great that it produced an explosion of merriment which he could not restrain. He was a handsome lad of twenty—blue-eyed, with brown hair curling closely about his head, strongly built, and full of life, though not gigantic in his proportions. Even now, though he had heard of the imperious little Lady of the Manor, it did not occur to him to connect her with this stranger. He laughed with perfect heartiness and *abandon*; she looking on quite gravely and steadily, the while, assisting at the outburst—a fact which did not diminish the amusing character of the scene.

'I came to help you,' he said. 'I hope you will not give information. Nobody will know I have trespassed unless you tell, and that would be ungrateful; for I thought there was something the matter, and came to be of use to you.'

'There is nothing the matter,' said Kate, very gravely, making a photograph of him with the keen, inquisitive eyes, from which, by this time, all tears were gone.

'I am glad to hear it,' he said; and then, with another laugh—'I suppose you are trespassing too. Can I help you over the fence?—or is there anything that I can do?'

'I am not trespassing—I am at home—I am Miss Courtenay,' said Kate, with infinite dignity, rising from the grass. She stood thus looking at him with the air of a queen defending her realm from invasion; she felt, to tell the truth, something like Helen Macgregor, when she starts up suddenly, and demands of the Sassenach how they dare to come into Macgregor's country. But the young man was not impressed; the muscles about his mouth quivered with suppressed laughter and the strenuous effort to keep it down. He made her a bow—the best he could under the circumstances—and stood with the evening sunshine shining upon his uncovered head and crisp curls, a very pleasant object to look upon, in an attitude of respect which was half fun and half mockery, though Kate did not find that out.

'Then I have been mistaken, and there is nothing for it but to apologise, and take myself off,' said Bertie. 'I am very sorry, I am sure. I thought something had gone wrong. To tell the truth I thought you were—crying.'

'I was crying,' said Kate. She did not in the least want him to go. He was company—he was novelty—he was something quite fresh, and already had altogether driven away her passion and her tears. Her heart quite leapt up at this agreeable diversion. 'I was crying, and something had gone very wrong,' she said in a subdued tone, and with a gentle sigh.

'I am very sorry,' said Bertie. 'I don't suppose it is anything in which I could be of use—?'

She looked at him again. 'I think I know who you are,' she said. 'You must be the second son at the Rectory—the one whom they call Bertie. At least I don't know who else you could be.'

'Yes, I am the one they call Bertie,' he said, laughing. 'Herbert Hardwick, at your service. And I did not mean to trespass.'

The laugh rang pleasantly through all the echoes. It was infectious. Kate felt that, but for her dignity, she would like to laugh too. And yet it was a serious matter; and to aid and abet a trespasser, and at the same time 'encourage' the Rectory people, was, she felt, a thing which she ought not to do. But then it had been real concern for herself, the Lady of the Manor, which had been at the bottom of it; and that deserved to be considered on the other side.

'I suppose not,' she said, seriously. 'Indeed, I am very particular about it. I don't see why you should laugh. I should not think of going to walk in your grounds without leave, and why should you in mine? But since you are here, you must not go all that way back. If you like to come with me, I will show you a nearer way. Don't you think it is a very fine park? Were you ever in one like it before?'

'Yes,' said Herbert, calmly, 'a great many. Langton-Courtenay is very nice, but it wants size. The glades are pretty, and the trees are charming, but everything is on a small scale.'

'On a small scale!' Kate cried, half-choking with indignation. This unparalleled presumption took away even her voice.

'Yes, decidedly small. How many acres are there in it? My uncle, Sir Herbert Eldridge, has five hundred acres in his. I am called after him, and I have been a great deal with him, you know. That is why I think your park so small. But it is very pretty!' said Herbert, condescendingly, with a sense of the humour of the situation. As for Kate, she was crushed. She looked up at him first in a blaze of disdain, intending to do battle for her own, but the number of acres in Sir Herbert Eldridge's park made an end of Kate.

'I thought you were going to be a clergyman,' she said.

'So I am, I suppose; but what then?'

'Oh! I thought—I didn't know,' cried Kate. 'I supposed perhaps you were not very well off. But if you have such a rich uncle, with such a beautiful park–'

'I don't know what that has to do with it,' said Bertie, with a mischievous light in his eyes. 'We are not so very poor. We have dinners three or four times a week, and bread and cheese on the other days. A great many people are worse off than that.'

'If you mean to laugh at me,' said Kate, stopping short, with an angry gesture, 'I think you had better turn back again. I am not a person to be made fun of.' And then instantly the water rushed to her eyes, for she was as susceptible as any child is to ridicule. The young man checked himself on the verge of laughter, and apologised.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'I did not mean to make myself disagreeable. Besides, I don't think you are quite well. I hope you will let me walk with you as far as the Hall.'

'Oh! no,' said Kate. But the suppressed tears, which had come to her eyes out of rage and indignation, suddenly grew blinding with self-pity, and recollection of her hard fate. 'Oh! you can't think how unhappy I am,' she said, suddenly clasping her hands together—and a big tear came with a rush down her innocent nose, and fell, throwing up a little shower of salt spray from the concussion, upon her ungloved hand. This startled her, and her sense of dignity once more awoke; but she struggled with difficulty against her desire for sympathy. 'I ought not to talk to a stranger,' she said; 'but, oh! you can't think how disagreeable Uncle Courtenay can make himself, though he looks so nice. And Miss Blank does not mind if I were dead and buried! Oh!' This exclamation was called forth by another great blot of dew from her eyes, which once more dashed and broke upon her hand, as a wave does on a rock. Kate looked at it with a silent concern which absorbed her. Her own tears! What was there in the world more touching or more sad?

'I am so sorry,' said Bertie Hardwick, moved by compassion. 'Was that what you were crying for? You should come to the Rectory, to my mother, who always sets everybody right.'

'Your mother would not care to see me,' said Kate, looking at him wistfully. 'She does not like me—she thinks I am your enemy. People should consider, Mr. Bertie—they should consider my position–'

'Yes, you poor little thing,' said Bertie, with the utmost sympathy; 'that is quite true—you have neither father nor mother to keep you right—people ought to make allowance for that.'

To describe Kate's consternation at this speech would be impossible. She a poor little thing!—she without any one to set her right! Was the boy mad? She was so stunned for the moment that she could make no reply—so many new emotions overwhelmed her. To make the discovery that Bertie Hardwick was nice, that he had an uncle with a park larger than the park at Langton-Courtenay; to learn that Langton-Courtenay was 'small,' and that she herself was a poor little thing. 'What next?' Kate asked herself. For all this had come to her knowledge in the course of half an hour. If life was to bring a succession of such surprises, how strange, how very strange it must be!

‘And I do wish you knew my mother,’ he went on innocently, not having the least idea that Kate’s silence arose from the fact that she was dumb with indignation; ‘she has the gift of understanding everybody. Isn’t it a pity that you should not know us, Miss Courtenay? My little sister Minnie is about your age, I should think.’

‘It is not my fault I don’t know you,’ burst forth Kate; ‘it is because you have not behaved properly to me—because your father would not pay any attention. Is it right for a clergyman to set a bad example, and teach people to rebel? He never even took any notice of my letter, though I am the natural head of the parish–’

‘You poor child!’ cried Bertie; and then he laughed.

Kate could not bear it—this was worse than her Uncle Courtenay. She stood still for a moment, and looked at him with things unspeakable in her eyes; and then she turned round, and rushed off across the green sward to the Hall, leaving him bewildered and amazed in the middle of the park, this time most evidently a trespasser, not even knowing his way back. He called after her, but received no answer; he stood and gazed round him in his consternation. Finally he laughed, though this time it was at himself, thus left in the lurch. But Kate was not aware of that fact. She heard the laugh, and it gave her wings; she fled to her melancholy home, where there was nobody to comfort her, choking with sobs and rage. Oh! how forlorn she was!—oh! how insulted, despised, trodden upon by everybody, she who was the lawful lady of the land! He would go and tell the Rectory girls, and together they would laugh at her. Kate would have sent a thunderbolt on the Rectory, or fire from Heaven, if she could.

CHAPTER IV

Kate rushed upstairs to her own room when she reached the Hall; she was wild with mortification and the sense of downfall. It was the first time she had come into collision with her fellow-creatures of a class equal to her own. Servants and poor people in the village had been impertinent to her ere now; but these were accidents, which Kate treated with the contempt they deserved, and which she could punish by the withdrawal of privileges and presents. She could scold, and did so soundly; and she could punish. But she could neither scold nor punish in the present case. Her Uncle Courtenay would only look at her in that exasperating way, with that cool smile on his face, as if she were a kitten; and this new being, with whom already she felt herself so well acquainted—Bertie would laugh, and be kind, and sorry for her. 'Poor child!—poor little thing!' These were the words he had dared to use. 'Oh!' Kate thought, I would like to kill him! I would like to–' And then she asked herself what would he say at home? and writhed on the bed on which she had thrown herself in inextinguishable shame. They would laugh at her; they would make fun of her. 'Oh! I would like to kill myself,' cried Kate, in her thoughts. She cried her eyes out in the silence of her room. There was no Bertie to come there with sympathetic eyes to ask what she was doing. Miss Blank did not care; neither did any one in the house—not even her own maid, who was always about her, and to whom she would talk for hours together. Kate buried her head in her pillow, and tried to picture to herself the aspect of the Rectory. There would be the mother—who, Bertie said, understood everybody—seated somewhere near the table; and Edith and Minnie in the room—one of them, perhaps, doing worsted-work, one at the piano, or copying music, or drawing, as young ladies do in novels. Now and then, no doubt Mrs. Hardwick would give them little orders; she would say, perhaps, 'Play me one of the Lieder, Minnie,' or 'that little air of Mozart's.' And she would say something about her work to Edith. Involuntarily that picture rose before lonely Kate. She seemed to see them seated there, with the windows open, and sweet scents coming in from the garden. She heard the voices murmuring, and a soft little strain, *andante pianissimo*, tinkling like the soft flow of a stream through the pleasant place. Oh! how pleasant it must be—even though she did not like the Rectory people, though Mr. Hardwick had been so rebellious, though they did not believe in her (Kate's) natural headship of Church and Slate in Langton-Courtenay.

She sobbed as she lay and dreamed, and developed her new imagination. She had wondered, half angrily, half wistfully, about the Rectory people before, but Bertie seemed to give a certain reality to them. He was the brother of the girl whom Kate had so often inspected with keen eyes, but did not know; and he said 'Mamma' to that unknown Mrs. Hardwick. 'Mamma!' What a curious word it was, when you came to think of it! Not so serious, nor full of meaning as mother was, but soft and caressing—as of some one who would always feel for you, always put her arm round you, say 'dear' to you, ask what was the matter? Miss Blank never asked what was the matter! She took it for granted that Kate was cross, that it was 'her own fault,' or, as the very kindest hypothesis, that she had a headache, which was not in Kate's way.

She lay sobbing, as I have said; but sobbing softly, as her emotion wore itself out, without tears. Her eyes were red, and her temples throbbed a little. She was worn out; she would not rouse herself and go downstairs to tempt another conflict with her uncle, as, had it not been for this last event, she would have felt disposed to do. And yet, poor child, she wanted her tea. Dinner had not been a satisfactory meal, and Kate could not help saying to herself that if Minnie and Edith had been suffering as she was, their mamma would have come to them in the dark, and kissed them, and bathed their hot foreheads, and brought them cups of tea. But there was no one to bring a cup of tea, without being asked, to a girl who had no mother. Kate had but to ring her bell, and she could have had whatever she pleased; but what did that matter? No one came near her, as it happened. The governess and her maid both supposed her to be with her uncle, and it was only when Maryanne came in at

nine o'clock to prepare her young mistress's hair-brushes and dressing-gown, that the young mistress was found, to Maryanne's consternation, stretched on her bed, with a face as white as her dress, and eyes surrounded with red rings. And in the dark, of all things in the world, in a place like Langton-Courtenay, where it was well known the Blue Lady walked, and turned folks to stone! At the first glance Maryanne felt certain that the Blue Lady only could be responsible for the condition in which her young mistress was found.

'Oh! miss,' she cried, 'and why didn't you ring the bell?'

'It did not matter,' said Kate, reproachful and proud.

'Lying there all in the dark—and it don't matter! 'Oh! miss, I know as you ain't timorsome like me, but if you was once to see something–'

'Hold your tongue!' said Kate, peremptorily. 'See something! The thing is, in this house, that one never sees anything! One might die, and it never would be known. You don't care enough for one to come and look if one is dead or alive.'

'Oh! miss!'

'Don't say "Oh miss!" to me,' cried Kate, indignantly, 'or pretend– Go and fetch me some tea. That is the only thing you can do. You don't forget your own tea, or anything else you want; but when I am out of sorts, or have a—headache–'

Kate had no headache, except such as her crying had made; but it was the staple malady, the thing that did duty for everything in Miss Blank's vocabulary, and her pupil naturally followed her example, to this extent, at least.

'Have you got a headache, miss? I'll tell Miss Blank—I'll go and fetch the housekeeper.'

'If you do, I will ask Uncle Courtenay to send you away to-morrow!' cried Kate. 'Go and fetch me some tea.'

But the tea which she had to order for herself was very different, she felt sure, from the tea that Edith Hardwick's mother would have carried upstairs to her unasked. It was tea made by Maryanne, who was not very careful if the kettle was boiling, and who had filled a large teapot full of water, in order to get this one cup. It was very hot and very washy, and made Kate angry. She sent away Maryanne in a fit of indignation, and did her own hair for the night, and made herself very uncomfortable. How different it must be with Edith and Minnie! If Kate had only known it, however, Edith and Minnie, had they conducted themselves as she was doing, would have been metaphorically whipped and put to bed.

In the morning she came down with pale cheeks, but no one took any notice. Uncle Courtenay was reading his paper, and had other things to think of; and Miss Blank intended to ask what her pupil had been doing with herself when they should be alone together in the school-room. They ate their meal in a solemn silence, broken only now and then by a remark from Miss Blank, which was scarcely less solemn. Uncle Courtenay took no notice—he read his paper, which veiled him even from his companion's eyes. At last, Miss Blank, having finished her breakfast, made a sign to Kate that it was time to rise; and then Kate took courage.

'Uncle Courtenay,' she said very softly, 'you said you were going to call—at—the Rectory?'

Uncle Courtenay looked at her round the corner of his paper. 'Well,' he said, 'what of that? Of course I shall call at the Rectory—after what you have told me, I have no choice.'

'Then please—may I go with you?' said Kate. She cast down her eyes demurely as she spoke, and consequently did not see the inquiring glance that he cast at her; but she saw, under her eyelashes, that he had laid down his paper; and this evidence of commotion was a comfort to her soul.

'Go with me!' he said. 'Not to give the Rector any further impertinence, I hope?'

Kate's eyes flashed, but she restrained herself. 'I have never been impertinent to any one, uncle. If I mistook what I had a right to, was that my fault? I am willing to make it up, if they are; and I can go alone if I mayn't go with you.'

'Oh! you can go with me if you choose,' said Mr. Courtenay, ungraciously; and then he took up his paper. But he was not so ungracious as he appeared; he was rather glad, on the whole, to have this opportunity of talking to her, and to see that (as he thought) his reproof of the previous night had produced so immediate an effect. He said to himself, cheerfully, 'Come, the child is not so ungovernable after all;' and was pleased, involuntarily, by the success of his operation. He was pleased, too, with her appearance when she was dressed, and ready to accompany him. She was subdued in tone, and less talkative a great deal than she had been the day before. He took it for granted that it was his influence that had done this—'Another proof,' he said to himself, 'how expedient it is to show that you are master, and will stand no nonsense.' He had been so despairing about her the night before, and saw such a vista of troubles before him in the six years of guardianship that remained, that this docility made him at once complacent and triumphant now.

'I don't want to be hard upon you, Kate,' he said; 'but you must recollect that at present, in the eye of the law, you are a child, and have no right to interfere with anything—neither parish, nor estate, nor even house.'

'But it is all mine, Uncle Courtenay.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' said her guardian, promptly. 'The deer in the park have about as much right to meddle as you.'

'Is our park small?' said Kate. 'Do you know Sir Herbert Eldridge, Uncle Courtenay? Where does he live?—and has he a very fine place? I can't believe that there are five hundred acres in his park; and I don't know how many there are in ours. I don't understand measuring one's own places. What does it matter an acre or two? I am sure there is no park so nice as Langton-Courtenay under the sun.'

'What is all this about parks? You take away my breath,' said Mr. Courtenay, in dismay.

'Oh! nothing,' said Kate; 'only that I heard a person say—when I was out last night I met one of the Rectory people, Uncle Courtenay—it is partly for that I want to go—his sister, he says, is the same age as I–'

'*His* sister!—it was a he, then?' said Mr. Courtenay, with that prompt suspiciousness which is natural to the guardian of an heiress.

'It was Bertie, the second son—of course it was a he. A girl could not have jumped over the fence—one might scramble, you know, but one couldn't jump it with one's petticoats. He told me one or two things—about his family.'

'But why did he jump over the fence? And what do you know about him? Do you talk to everybody that comes in your way—about his family?' cried Mr. Courtenay, with returning dismay.

'Of course I do, Uncle Courtenay,' said Kate, looking full at him. 'You may say I have no right to interfere, but I have always known that Langton was to be mine, and I have always taken an interest in—everybody. Why, it was my duty. What else could I do?'

'I should prefer that you did almost anything else,' said Mr. Courtenay, hastily; and then he stopped short, feeling that it was incautious to betray his reasons, or suggest to the lively imagination of this perverse young woman that there was danger in Bertie Hardwick and his talk. 'The danger's self were lure alone,' he said to himself, and plunged, in his dismay, into another subject. 'Do you remember what I said to you last night about your Aunt Anderson?' he said. 'Shouldn't you like to go and see her, Kate? She has a daughter of your own age, an only child. They have been abroad all their lives, and, I daresay, speak a dozen languages—that sort of people generally do. I think it would be a right thing to visit her–'

'If it would be a right thing to visit her, Uncle Courtenay, it would be still righter to ask her to come here.'

'But that I forbid, my dear,' said the old man.

Then there was a pause. Kate was greatly tempted to lose her temper, but, on the whole, experience taught her that losing one's temper seldom does much good, and she restrained herself. She tried a different mode of attack.

'Uncle Courtenay,' she said, pathetically, 'is it because you don't want any one to love me that nobody is ever allowed to stay here?'

'When you are older, Kate, you will see what I mean,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'I don't wish you to enter the world with any yoke on your neck. I mean you to be free. You will thank me afterwards, when you see how you have been saved from a tribe of locusts—from a household of dependents–'

Kate stopped and gazed at him with a curious, semi-comprehension. She put her head a little on one side, and looked up to him with her bright eyes. 'Dependents!' she said—'dependents, uncle! Miss Blank tells me I have a great number of dependents, but I am sure they don't care for me.'

'They never do,' said Mr. Courtenay—this was, he thought, the one grand experience which he had won from life.

CHAPTER V

Bertie Hardwick was on the lawn in front of the Rectory when the two visitors approached. The Rectory was a pretty, old-fashioned house, large and quaint, with old picturesque wings and gables, and a front much covered with climbing plants. Kate had always been rather proud of it, as one of the ornaments of her estate. She looked at it almost as she looked at the pretty west gate of her park, where the lodge was so commodious and so pleasant, coveted by all the poor people on the estate. It was by Kate's grace and favour that the west lodge was given to one or another, and so would it be with the Rectory. She looked upon the one in much the same light as the other. It would be hard to tell what magnetic chord of sympathies had moved Bertie Hardwick to some knowledge of what his young acquaintance was about to do; but it is certain that he was there, pretending to play croquet with his sisters, and keeping a very keen eye upon the bit of road which was visible through the break in the high laurel hedge. He had been amused, and indeed somewhat touched and interested, in spite of himself, on the previous night; and somehow he had a feeling that she would come. When he caught a glimpse of her, he threw down the croquet mallet, as if it hurt him, and cried out—'Edith, run and tell mamma she is coming. I felt quite sure she would.'

'Who is coming?' cried the two girls.

'Oh, don't chatter and ask questions—rush and tell mamma!' cried Bertie; and he himself, without thinking of it, went forward to open the garden door. It was a trial of Kate's steadiness to meet him thus, but she did so with wide-open eyes and a certain serious courage. 'You saw me at a disadvantage, but I don't mind,' Kate's serious eyes were saying; and as she took the matter very gravely indeed, it was she who had the best of it now. Bertie, in spite of himself, felt confused as he met her look; he grew red, and was ashamed of his own foolish impulse to go and open the door.

'This is Mr. Bertie Hardwick, uncle,' said Kate, gravely; 'and this, Mr. Bertie, is my Uncle Courtenay—whom I told you of,' she added, with a little sigh.

Her Uncle Courtenay—whom she was obliged to obey, and over whom neither her impetuosity nor her melancholy had the least power. She shook her head to herself, as it were, over her sad fate, and by this movement placed once more in great danger the gravity of poor Bertie, who was afraid to laugh or otherwise misconduct himself under the eyes of Mr. Courtenay. He led the visitors into the drawing-room, through the open windows; and it is impossible to tell what a relief it was to him when he saw his mother coming to the rescue. And then they all sat down; Kate as near Mrs. Hardwick as she could manage to establish herself. Kate did not understand the shyness with which Minnie and Edith, half withdrawn on the other side of their mother, looked at her.

'I am not a wild beast,' she said to herself. 'I wonder do they think I will bite?'

'Did you tell them about last night?' she said, turning quickly to Bertie; for Mrs. Hardwick, instead of talking to *her*, the Lady of the Manor, as Kate felt she ought to have done, gave her attention to Mr. Courtenay instead.

'I told them I had met you, Miss Courtenay,' said Bertie.

'And did they laugh? Did you make fun of me? Why do they look at me so strangely?' cried Kate, growing red; 'I am not a wild beast.'

'You forget that you and my father have quarrelled,' said Bertie; 'and the girls naturally take his side.'

'Oh! is it that?' cried Kate, clearing up a little. She gave a quick glance at him, with a misgiving as to whether he was entirely serious. But Bertie kept his countenance. 'For that matter, I have come to say that I did not mean anything wrong; perhaps I made a mistake. Uncle Courtenay says that, till I am of age, I have no power; and if the Rector pleases—oh! there is the Rector—I ought to speak for myself.'

She rose as Mr. Hardwick came up to her. Her sense of her own importance gave a certain dignity to her young figure, which was springy and stately, like that of a young Diana. She threw back the flood of chestnut hair that streamed over her shoulders, and looked straight at him with her bright, well-opened eyes. Altogether she looked a creature of a different species from Edith and Minnie, who kept close together, looking at her with wonder, and a mixture of admiration and repugnance.

'Isn't it bold of her to speak to papa like that?' Minnie whispered to Edith.

'But she is going to ask his pardon,' Edith whispered back to Minnie. 'Oh! hush, and hear what she says.'

As for Bertie, he looked on with a strange feeling that it was he who had introduced this new figure into the domestic circle, and with a little anxiety of proprietorship hoped that she would make a good impression. She was his novelty, his property—and she was, there could be no doubt, a very great novelty indeed.

'Mr. Hardwick, please,' said Kate, reddening, yet confronting him with her head very erect, and her eyes very open, 'I find that I made a mistake. Uncle Courtenay tells me I had no right at my age to interfere. I shall not be of age for six years, and don't you think it would be best to be friendly —till then? If you are willing, I should be glad. I thought I had a right—but I understand now that it was all a mistake.'

Mr. Hardwick looked round upon the company, questioning and puzzled. He was a tall man, spare, but of a large frame, with deep-set blue eyes looking out of a somewhat brown face. His eyes looked like a bit of sky, which had strayed somehow into that brown, ruddy framework. They were the same colour as his son's, Bertie's; but Bertie's youthful countenance was still white and red, and the contrast was not so great. The Rector's face was very grave when in repose, and its expression had almost daunted Kate; but gradually he caught the joke (which was intended to be so profoundly serious) and lighted up. He had looked at his wife first, with a man's natural instinct, asking an explanation; and perhaps the suppressed laughter in Mrs. Hardwick's eyes was what gave him the clue. He made the little Lady of the Manor a profound bow. 'Let us understand each other, Miss Courtenay,' he said, with mock solemnity—'are we to be friendly only till you come of age? Six years is a long time. But if after that hostilities are to be resumed–'

'When I am of age of course I must do my duty,' said Kate.

She was so serious, standing there in the midst of them, grave as twenty judges, that nobody could venture to laugh. Uncle Courtenay, who was getting impatient, and who had no feeling either of chivalry or admiration for his troublesome ward, uttered a hasty exclamation; but the Rector took her hand, and shook it, with a smile which at once conciliated his two girls, who were looking on.

'That is just the feeling you ought to have,' he said. 'I see we shall be capital friends—I mean for six years; and then whatever you see to be your duty—Is it a bargain? I am delighted to accept these terms.'

'And I am very glad,' said Kate, sedately. She sat down again when he released her hand—giving her head a little shake, as was customary with her, and looked round with a certain majestic composure on the little assembly. As for Bertie, though he could not conceal from himself the fact that his father and mother were much amused, he still felt very proud of his young lady. He went up to her, and stood behind her chair, and made signs to his mother that she was to talk; which Mrs. Hardwick did to such good purpose that Kate, who wanted little encouragement, and to whom a friendly face was sweet, soon stood fully self-revealed to her new acquaintances. They took her out upon the lawn, and instructed her in croquet, and grew familiar with her; and, before half an hour had passed, Minnie and Edith, one on each side, were hanging about her, half in amazement, half in admiration. She was younger than both, for even Minnie, the little one, was sixteen; but then neither of them was a great lady—neither the head and mistress of her own house.

'Isn't it dreadfully dreary for you to live in that great house all by yourself?' said Edith. They were so continually together, and so apt to take up each other's sentiments, one repeating and continuing

what the other had said, that they could scarcely get through a question except jointly. So that Minnie now added her voice, running into her sister's. 'It must be so dull, unless your governess is very nice indeed.'

'My governess—Miss Blank?' said Kate. 'I never thought whether she was nice or not. I have had so many. One comes for a year, and then another, and then another. I never could make out why they liked to change so often. Uncle Courtenay thinks it is best.'

'Oh! our governess stayed for years and years,' said Edith; added Minnie, 'We were nearly as fond of her as of mamma.'

'But then I suppose,' said Kate, with a little sigh, 'she was fond of you?'

'Why, of course,' cried the two girls together. 'How could she help it, when she had known us all our lives?'

'You think a great deal of yourselves,' said Kate, with dreary scorn, 'to think people must be fond of you! If you were like me you would know better. I never fancy anything of the kind. If they do what I tell them, that is all I ask. You are very different from me. You have father, and mother, and brothers, and all sorts of things. But I have nobody, except Uncle Courtenay—and I am sure I should be very glad to make you a present of him.'

'Have you not even an aunt?' said Minnie, with big round eyes of wonder. 'Nor a cousin?' said Edith, equally surprised.

'No—that is, oh! yes, I have one of each—Uncle Courtenay was talking of them as we came here—but I never saw them. I don't know anything about them,' said Kate.

'What curious people, not to come to see you!' 'And what a pity you don't know them!' said the sisters.

'And how curiously you talk,' said uncompromising Kate; 'both together. Please, is there only one of you, or are there two of you? I suppose it is talking in the same voice, and being dressed alike.'

'We are considered alike,' said Edith, the eldest, with an air of suppressed offence. As for Minnie, she was too indignant to make any reply.

'And so you are alike,' said Kate; 'and a little like your brother, too; but he speaks for himself. I don't object to people being alike; but I should try very hard to make you talk like two people, not like one, and not always to hang together and dress the same, if you were with me.'

Upon this there was a dead pause. The Rectory girls were good girls, but not quite prepared to stand an assault like this. Minnie, who had a quick temper, and who had been taught that it was indispensable to keep it down, shut her lips tight, and resisted the temptation to be angry. Edith, who was more placid, gazed at the young censor with wonder. What a strange girl!

'Because,' said Kate, endeavouring to be explanatory, 'your voices have just the same sound, and you are just the same height, and your blue frocks are even made the same. Are there so many girls in the world,' she said suddenly, with a pensive appeal to human nature in general, 'that people can afford to throw them away, and make two into one?'

Deep silence followed. Mrs. Hardwick had been called away, and Bertie was talking to the gardener at the other end of the lawn. This was the first unfortunate result of leaving the girls to themselves. They walked on a little, the two sisters falling a step behind in their discomfiture. 'How dare she speak to us so?' Minnie whispered through her teeth. 'Dare!—she is our guest!' said Edith, who had a high sense of decorum. A minute after, Kate perceived that something was amiss. She turned round upon them, and gazed into their faces with serious scrutiny. 'Are you angry?' she said —'have I said anything wrong?'

'Oh! not angry,' said Edith. 'I suppose, since you look surprised, you don't—mean—any harm.'

'I?—mean harm?– Oh! Mr. Bertie,' cried Kate, 'come here quick—quick!—and explain to them. *You* know me. What have I done to make them angry? One may surely say what one thinks.'

‘I don’t know that it is good to say all one thinks,’ said Edith, who taught in the Sunday-schools, and who was considered very thoughtful and judicious—‘at least, when it is likely to hurt other people’s feelings.’

‘Not when it is true?’ said the remorseless Kate.

And then the whole group came to a pause, Bertie standing open-mouthed, most anxious to preserve the peace, but not knowing how. It was the judicious Edith who brought the crisis to a close by acting upon one of the maxims with which she was familiar as a teacher of youth.

‘Should you like to walk round the garden?’ she said, changing the subject with an adroitness which was very satisfactory to herself, ‘or come back into the drawing-room? There is not much to see in our little place, after your beautiful gardens at Langton-Courtenay; but still, if you would like to walk round—or perhaps you would prefer to go in and join mamma?’

‘My uncle must be ready to go now,’ said Kate, with responsive quickness, and she stalked in before them through the open window. As good luck would have it, Mr. Courtenay was just rising to take his leave. Kate followed him out, much subdued, in one sense, though all in arms in another. The girls were not nearly so nice as she thought they would be—reality was not equal to anticipation—and to think they should have quarrelled with her the very first time for nothing! This was the view of the matter which occurred to Kate.

CHAPTER VI

I cannot undertake to say how it was, but it is certain that Bertie Hardwick met Kate next day, as she took her walk into the village, accompanied by Miss Blank. At the sight of him, that lady's countenance clouded over; but Kate was glad, and the young man took no notice of Miss Blank's looks. As it happened, the conversation between the governess and her pupil had flagged—it often flagged. The conversation between Kate and Miss Blank consisted generally of a host of bewildering questions on the one side, and as few answers as could be managed on the other. Miss Blank no doubt had affairs of her own to think of; and then Kate's questions were of everything in heaven and earth, and might have troubled even a wise counsellor. Mr. Courtenay was still at Langton, but had sent out his niece for her usual walk—a thing by which she felt humiliated—and she had met with a rebuff in the village in consequence of some interference. She was in low spirits, and Miss Blank did not mind. Accordingly, Bertie was a relief and comfort to her, more than can be described.

'Why don't your sisters like me?' said Kate. 'I wonder, Mr. Bertie, why people don't like me? If they would let me, I should like to be friends; but you saw they would not.'

'I don't think—perhaps—that they quite understood–'

'But it is so easy to understand,' said Kate, with a little impatient sigh. She shook her head, and tossed back her shining hair, which made an aureole round her. 'Don't let us speak of it,' she said; 'but you understood from the very first?'

Bertie was pleased, he could not have told why. The fact was, he, too, had been extremely puzzled at first; but now, after three meetings, he felt himself an old friend and privileged interpreter of the strange girl whom his sisters were so indignant with, and who certainly was a more important personage at Langton-Courtenay than any other fifteen-year-old girl in England. Both Mr. Hardwick and Bertie had to some extent made themselves Kate's champions, moved thereto by that strange predisposition to take the side of a feminine stranger (at least, when she is young and pleasant) against the women of their own house, which almost all men are moved by. Women take their father's, their husband's, their brother's side through thick and thin, with a natural certainty that their own must be in the right; but men invariably take it for granted that their own must be wrong. Thus, not only Bertie, who might be moved by other arguments, but even Mr. Hardwick, secretly believed that 'the girls' had taken offence foolishly, and maintained the cause of Kate.

'They have seen nothing out of their own sphere,' their brother said, apologetically—'they don't know much—they are very much petted and spoiled at home.'

'Ah!' said Kate, feeling as if a chilly *douche* had suddenly been administered in her face. She drew a long, half-sobbing breath, and then she said, with a pathetic tone in her voice, 'Oh! I wonder why people don't like me!'

'You are wrong, Miss Courtenay—I am sure you are wrong,' said Bertie, warmly. 'Not like you!—that must be their stupidity alone. And I can't believe, even, that any one is so stupid. You must be making a mistake.'

'Oh! Mr. Bertie, how can you say so? Why, your sisters!' cried Kate, returning to the charge.

'But it is not that they—don't like you,' said Bertie. 'How could you think it? It is only a misunderstanding—a—a—want of knowing–'

'You are trying to save my feelings,' said Kate; 'but never mind my feelings. No, Mr. Bertie, it is quite true. I do not want to deceive myself—people do not like me.' These words she produced singly, as if they had been so many stones thrown at the world. 'Oh! please don't say anything—perhaps it is my fate; perhaps I am never to be any better. But that is how it is—people don't like me; I am sure I don't know why.'

'Miss Courtenay–' Bertie began, with great earnestness; but just then the man-of-all-work from the Rectory, who was butler, and footman, and valet, and everything combined, made his appearance

at the corner, beckoning to him; and as the servant was sent by his father, he had no alternative but to go away. When he was out of sight, Kate, whose eyes had followed him as far as he was visible, breathed forth a gentle sigh, and was going on quietly upon her way, silent, until the mood should seize her to chatter once more, when an event occurred that had never been known till now to happen at Langton—the governess, who was generally blank as her name, opened her mouth and spoke.

'Miss Courtenay,' she said, for she was not even sufficiently interested in her pupil to care to speak to her by her Christian name—'Miss Courtenay, if this sort of thing continues, I shall have to go away.'

Kate, who was not much less startled than Balaam was on a similar occasion, stopped short, and turned round with a face of consternation upon her companion. 'If what continues?' she said.

'This,' said Miss Blank—'this meeting of young men, and walking with them. It is hard enough to have to manage *you*; but if this goes on, I shall speak to Mr. Courtenay. I never was compromised before, and I don't mean to be so now.'

Kate was so utterly unconscious of the meaning of all this, that she simply stared in dismay. 'Compromised!' she said, with big eyes of astonishment; 'I don't know what you mean. What is it that must not go on? Miss Blank, I hope you have not had a sunstroke, or something that makes people talk without knowing what they say.'

'I will not take any impertinence from you, Miss Courtenay,' said Miss Blank, going red with wrath. 'Ask why people don't like you, indeed!—you should ask me, instead of asking a gentleman, fishing for compliments! *I'll* tell you why people don't like you. It is because you are always interfering—thrusting yourself into things you have no business with—taking things upon you that no child has a right to meddle with. That is why people hate you–'

'Hate me!' cried Kate, who, for her part, had grown pale with horror.

'Yes; hate you—that is the word. Do you think any one would put up with such a life who could help it? You are an heiress, and people are obliged to mind you; but if you had been a poor girl, you would have known the difference. Nobody would have put up with you then; you would have been beaten, or starved, or done something to. It is only your money that gives you the power to trample others under your feet.'

Kate was appalled by this address. It stupefied her, in the first place, that Miss Blank should have taken the initiative, and launched forth into speech, as it were, on her own account; and the assault took away the girl's breath. She felt as one might feel who had been suddenly saluted with a shower of blows from an utterly unsuspected adversary. She did not know whether to fight or flee. She walked along mechanically by her assailant's side, and gasped for breath. Her eyes grew large and round with wonder. She listened in amaze, not able to believe her ears.

'But I won't be kept quiet any longer,' said Miss Blank—'I will speak. Why should I get myself into trouble for you? I will go to Mr. Courtenay, when we get back, and I will tell him it is impossible to go on like this. It was bad enough before. You were trouble enough from the first day I ever set eyes on you; but I have always said to myself, when *that* commences, I will go away. My character is above everything, and all the gold in England would not tempt me to stay.'

Kate listened to all this with a bewilderment that took from her the power of speech. What did the woman mean?—was she 'in a passion,' as, indeed, other governesses, to Kate's knowledge, had been; or was she mad? It must be a sunstroke, she decided at last. They had been walking in the sun, and Miss Blank's bonnet was too thin, being made of flimsy tulle. Her brain must be affected. Kate resolved heroically that she would not aggravate the sufferer by any response, but would send for the housekeeper as soon as they got back, and place Miss Blank in her hands. People in her sad condition must not be contradicted. She quickened her steps, discussing with herself whether a dark room and ice to the forehead would be enough, or whether it would be necessary to cut off all her hair, or even shave her head. This pre-occupation about Miss Blank's welfare shielded the girl for some time against the fiery, stinging arrows which were being thrown at her; but this immunity did

not last, for the way was long, and Miss Blank, having once broken out, put no further restraint upon herself. It was clear now that her only hope was in laying Kate prostrate, leaving no spirit nor power of resistance in her. By degrees the sharp words began to get admittance at the girl's tingling ears. She was beaten down by the storm of opposition. Was it possible?—could it be true? Did people *hate* her? Her imagination began to work as these burning missiles flew at her. Miss Blank had been her companion for a year, and hated her! Uncle Courtenay was her own uncle—her nearest relative—and he, too, hated her! The girls at the Rectory, who looked so gentle, had turned against her. Oh! why, why was it? By degrees a profound discouragement seized upon the poor child. Miss Blank was eloquent; she had a flow of words such as had never come to her before. She poured forth torrents of bitterness as she walked, and Kate was beaten down by the storm. By the time they reached home she had forgotten all about the sunstroke, and shaving Miss Blank's head, and thought of nothing but getting free—getting into the silence—being alone. Maryanne put a letter into her hand as she ran upstairs; but what did she care for a letter! Everybody hated her—if it were not that she was an heiress everybody would abandon her—and she had not one friend to go to, no one whom she could ask to help her in all the dreary world. She was too far gone for weeping. She sat down before her dressing-table and looked into the glass with miserable, dilated eyes. 'I am just like other people,' Kate said to herself; 'there is no mark upon me. Cain was marked; but that was because he was a murderer; and I never killed anybody, I never did any harm to anybody, that I know of. I am only just a girl, like other girls. Oh! I suppose I am dreadfully wicked! But then everybody is wicked—the Bible says so; and how am I worse than all the rest? I don't hate any one,' said Kate, aloud, and very slowly. Her poor little mouth quivered, her eyes filled, and right upon the letter on her table there fell one great blob of a tear. This roused her in the midst of her distress. To Kate—as to every human being of her age—it seemed possible that something new, something wonderful might be in any letter. She took it up and tore it open. She was longing for comfort, longing for kindness, as she had never done in her life.

The letter which we are about to transcribe was not a very wise one, perhaps not even altogether to be sworn by as true—but it opened an entire new world to poor Kate.

My dearest unknown darling niece,

'You can't remember me, for I have never seen you since you were a tiny, tiny baby in long clothes; and you have had nobody about you to remind you that you had any relations on your mother's side. You have never answered my letters even, dear, though I don't for a moment blame you, or suppose it is your fault. But now that I am in England, darling, we must not allow ourselves to be divided by unfortunate feelings that may exist between different sides of the family. I must see you, my dear only sister's only darling child! I have but one child, too, my Ombra, and she is as anxious as I am. I have written to your guardian, asking if he will let you come and see us. I do not wish to go to your grand house, which was always thought too fine for us, but I must see you, my darling child; and if Mr. Courtenay will not let you come to us, my Ombra and I will come to Langton-Courtenay, to the village, where we shall no doubt find lodgings somewhere—I don't mind how humble they are, so long as I can see you. My heart yearns to take you in my arms, to give you a hundred kisses, my own niece, my dear motherless child. Send me one little word by your own hand, and don't reject the love that is offered you, my dearest Kate. Ombra sends you her dear love, and thinks of you, not as a cousin, but as a sister; and I, who have the best right, long for nothing so much as to be a mother to you! Come to us, my sweet child, if your uncle will let you; but, in the meantime, write to me, that I may know you a little even before we meet. With warmest love, my darling niece, your most affectionate aunt and, if you will let her be so, mother,

'Jane Anderson.'

Now poor Kate had only two or three times in her whole life received a letter before. Since, as she said, she had 'grown up,' she had not heard from her aunt, who had written her, she recollected, one or two baby epistles, printed in large letters, in her childhood. Her poor little soul was still convulsed

with the first great, open undisguised shock of unkindness, when this other great event came upon her. It was also a shock in its way. It made such a tempest in her being as conflicting winds make out at sea. The one had driven her down to the depths, the other dashed her up, up to a dizzy height. She felt dazed, insensible, proud, triumphant, and happy, all at once. Here was somebody of her own, somebody of her very own—something like the mother at the Rectory. Something new, close, certain—her own!

She dashed the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief, seized upon her letter, her dear letter, and rushed downstairs to the library, where Uncle Courtenay sat in state, the judge, and final tribunal for all appeals.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Courtenay was in the library at Langton, tranquilly pursuing some part of the business which had brought him thither, when Miss Blank and her charge returned from their walk. His chief object, it is true, in this visit to the house of his fathers, had been to look after his ward; but there had been other business to do—leases to renew, timber to cut down, cottages to build; a multiplicity of small matters, which required his personal attention. These were straightforward, and did not trouble him as the others did; and the fact was that he felt much relieved by the absence of the young feminine problem, which it was so hard upon him, at his age, and with his habits, to be burdened with. He had dismissed her even out of his mind, and was getting through the less difficult matters steadily, with a grateful sense that here at least he had nothing in hand that was beyond his power. It was shady in the Langton library, cool, and very quiet; whereas outside there was one blaze of sunshine, and the day was hot. Mr. Courtenay was comfortable—perhaps for the first time since his arrival. He was satisfied with his present occupation, and for the moment had dismissed his other cares.

This was the pleasant position of affairs when Miss Blank rushed in upon him, with indignation in her countenance. There was something more than indignation—there was the flush of heat produced by her walk, and her unusual outburst of temper, and the dust, and a little dishevelment inseparable from wrath. She scarcely took time to knock at the door. She was a person who had been recommended to him as imperturbable in temper and languid in disposition—the last in the world to make any fuss; consequently he stared upon her now with absolute consternation, and even a little alarm.

'Compose yourself, Miss Blank—take time to speak. Has anything happened to Kate?'

He was quite capable of hearing with composure anything that might have happened to Kate—anything short of positive injury, indeed, which would have freed him of her, would have been tidings of joy.

'I have come to say, sir,' said Miss Blank, 'that there are some things a lady cannot be expected to put up with. I have always felt the time must come when I could not put up with Miss Courtenay. I am not an ill-tempered person, I hope–'

'Quite the reverse, I have always heard,' said Mr. Courtenay, politely, but with a sigh.

'Thank you, sir. I believe I have always been considered to have a good temper; but I have said to myself, since ever I came here, "Miss Courtenay is bad enough *now*—she is trial enough to any lady's feelings now." I am sorry to have to say it if it hurts your feelings, Mr. Courtenay, but your niece s—she is—it is really almost impossible for a lady who has a respect for herself, and does not wish to be hurried into exhibitions of temper, to say what Miss Kate is.'

'Pray compose yourself, Miss Blank. Take a seat. From my own observation,' said Mr. Courtenay, 'I am aware my niece must be troublesome at times.'

'Troublesome!' said Miss Blank—'at times! That shows, sir, how little you know. About her troublesomeness I can't trust myself to speak; nor is it necessary at the present moment. But I have always said to myself, "When that time comes, I will go at once." And it appears to me, Mr. Courtenay, that though premature, that time has come.'

'What time, for Heaven's sake?' said the perplexed guardian.

'Mr. Courtenay, you know what she is as well as I do. It is not for any personal reason, though I am aware many people think her pretty; but it is not that. She is an heiress, she will have a nice property, and a great deal of money, therefore it is quite natural that it should be premature.'

'Miss Blank, you would do me an infinite favour if you would speak plainly. What is it that is premature?'

Miss Blank had taken a seat, and she had loosed the strings of her bonnet. Her ideas of decorum had indeed been so far overcome by her excitement, that even under Mr. Courtenay's eye she had

begun to fan herself with her handkerchief. She made a pause in this occupation, and pressed her handkerchief to her face, as expressive of confusion; and from the other side of this shield she answered, 'Oh! that I should have to speak to a gentleman of such things! If you demand a distinct answer, I must tell you. It is *lovers*, Mr. Courtenay.'

'Lovers!' he said, involuntarily, with a laugh of relief.

'You may laugh, but it is no laughing matter,' said Miss Blank. 'Oh! if you had known, as I do by experience, what it is to manage girls! Do you know what a girl is, Mr. Courtenay?—the most aggravating, trying, unmanageable, untamable–'

'My dear Miss Blank,' said, Mr. Courtenay, seriously, 'I presume that you were once one of these untamable creatures yourself.'

'Ah!' said the governess, with a long-drawn breath. It had not occurred to her, and, curiously enough, now that it was suggested, the idea seemed rather to flatter her than otherwise. She shook her head; but she was softened. 'Perhaps I should not have said all girls,' she resumed. 'I was very strictly brought up, and never allowed to take such folly into my head. But to return to our subject, Mr. Courtenay. I must beg your attention to this—it has been my principle through life, I have never departed from it yet, and I cannot now—When lovers appear, I have always made it known among my friends—I go.'

'I have no doubt it is an admirable principle,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'But in the present case let us come to particulars. Who are the lovers?'

'One of the young gentlemen at the Rectory,' answered Miss Blank, promptly; and then for the first time she felt that she had produced an effect.

Mr. Courtenay made no reply—he put down his pen, which he had been holding all this time in his hand; his face clouded over; he pushed his paper away from him and puckered his lips and his forehead. This time, without doubt, she had produced an effect.

'I must beg you accordingly, Mr. Courtenay, to accept my resignation,' said Miss Blank. 'I have always kept up a good connection, and never suffered myself to be compromised, and I don't mean to begin now. This day month, sir, if you please—if in the meantime you are suited with another lady in my place–'

'Miss Blank, don't you think this is something like forsaking your post? Is it not ungenerous to desert my niece when she has so much need of your protection? Do you not feel–' Mr. Courtenay had commenced unawares.

'Sir,' said Miss Blank, with dignity, 'when I was engaged, it was specially agreed that this was to be no matter of feelings. I have specially watched over my feelings, that they might not get any way involved. I am sure you must recollect the terms of my engagement as well as I.'

Mr. Courtenay did recollect them, and felt he had made a false step; and then the difficulties of his position rushed upon his bewildered sight. He did not know girls as Miss Blank did, who had spent many a weary year in wrestling with them; but he knew enough to understand that, if a girl in her natural state was hard to manage, a girl with a lover must be worse. And what was he to do if left alone, and unaided, to rule and quiet such an appalling creature? He drew in his lips, and contracted his forehead, until his face was about half its usual size. It gave him a little relief when the idea suddenly struck him that Miss Blank's hypothesis might not be built on sufficient foundation. Women were always thinking of lovers—or, at least, not knowing anything precisely about women, so Mr. Courtenay had heard.

'Let us hope, at least,' he said, 'that your alarming suggestion has been hastily made. Will you tell me what foundation you have for connecting Kate's name with—with anything of the kind? She is only fifteen—she is not old enough.'

'I thought I had said distinctly, Mr. Courtenay, that I considered it to be premature?'

'Yes, yes, certainly—you said so—but– Perhaps, Miss Blank, you will kindly favour me with the facts–'

At this point another hurried knock came to the door. And once more, without waiting for an answer, Kate, all tears and trouble, her face flushed like Miss Blank's, her hair astray, and an open letter in her hand, came rushing into the room. Two agitated female creatures in one hour, rushing into the private sanctuary of the most particular of bachelors! Mr. Courtenay commended her, though she was his nearest relation, to all the infernal gods.

'What is the matter now?' he cried, sharply. 'Why do you burst in uninvited when I am busy? Kate, you seem to be trying every way to irritate and annoy me. What is it now?'

'Uncle,' cried Kate, breathlessly, 'I have just got a letter, and I want to ask you—never mind her!—may I go to my Aunt Anderson's? She is willing to have me, and it will save you heaps of trouble! Oh! please, Uncle Courtenay, please never mind anything else! May I go?'

'May you go—to your Aunt Anderson? Why, here is certainly a new arrangement of the board!' said Mr. Courtenay. He said the last words mockingly, and he fixed his eyes on Kate as if she had been a natural curiosity—which, indeed, in a great degree, she was to him.

'Yes—to my Aunt Anderson. You spoke of her yourself—you know you did. You said she must not come here! and she does not want to come here. I don't think she would come if she was asked! but she says I am to go to her. Uncle Courtenay, in a little while I shall be able to do what I like, and go where I like–'

'Not for six years, my dear,' said Mr. Courtenay, with a smile.

Kate stamped her foot in her passion.

'If I were to write to the Lord Chancellor, I am sure he would let me!' she cried.

'But you are not a ward in Chancery—you are my ward,' said Mr. Courtenay, blandly.

'Then I will run away!' cried Kate, once more stamping her foot. 'I will not stay here. I hate Langton-Courtenay, and everybody that is unkind, and the people who hate *me*. I tell you I hate them, Uncle Courtenay! I will run away!'

'I don't doubt it, for one,' said Miss Blank, quietly; 'but with whom, Miss Kate, I should like to know? I daresay your plans are all laid.'

Mr. Courtenay did not see the blank stare of surprise with which Kate, all innocent of the meaning which was conveyed to his ear by these words, surveyed her adversary. His own better-instructed mind was moved by it to positive excitement. Even if Miss Blank had been premature in her suggestion, still there could be little doubt that lovers were a danger from which Kate could not be kept absolutely safe. And there were sons at the Rectory, one of whom, a good-looking young fellow of twenty, he had himself seen coming forward with a look of delighted recognition. Danger! Why, it was almost more than danger; it seemed a certainty of evil—if not now, why, then, next year, or the year after! Mr. Courtenay, like most old men of the world, felt an instinctive distrust of, and repugnance to, parsons. And a young parson was proverbially on the outlook for heiresses, and almost considered it a duty to provide for himself by marriage. All this ran through his disturbed mind as these two troublesome feminine personages before him waited each for her answer. 'Confound women! They are more trouble than they are worth, a hundred times over!' the old bachelor said to himself.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Courtenay was much too true to his instincts, however, to satisfy these two applicants, or to commit himself by any decision on the spot. He dismissed Miss Blank with the formal courtesy which he employed towards his inferiors, begging her to wait until to-morrow, when he should have reflected upon the problem she had laid before him. And he sent away Kate with much less ceremony, bidding her hold her tongue, and leave the room and leave things alone which she did not understand. He would not listen to the angry response which rose to her lips; and Kate had a melancholy night in consequence, aggravated by the miserable sensation that she had been snubbed in presence of Miss Blank, who was quite ready to take advantage of her discomfiture. When Kate's guardian, however, was left alone to think, it is probable that his own reflections were not delightful. He was not a man apt to take himself to task, nor give way to self-examination, but still it was sufficiently apparent to him that his plan had not succeeded as he had hoped in Kate's case. What he had hoped for had been to produce a quiet, calm girl, who would do what she was told, whose expectations and wishes would be on a subdued scale, and who would be reasonable enough to feel that his judgment was supreme in all matters. Almost all men at one time or another of their lives entertain the idea of 'moulding' a model woman. Mr. Courtenay's ideal was not high—all he wanted was submissiveness, manageableness, quiet manners, and a total absence of the sentimental and emotional. The girl might have been permitted to be clever, to be a good musician, or a good artist, or a great student, if she chose, though such peculiarities always detract more or less from the air of good society which ought to distinguish a lady; but still Mr. Courtenay prided himself upon being tolerant, and he would not have interfered in such a case. But that this ward of his, this representative of his family, should choose to be an individual being with a very strong will and marked characteristics of her own, exasperated the old man of the world. 'Most women have no character at all,' he repeated to himself, raising his eyebrows in wondering appeal to Providence. Had the happy period when that aphorism was true, departed along with all the other manifestations of the age of Gold?—or was it still true, and was it the fault of Providence, to punish him for his sins, that his share of womankind should be so perverse? This was a question which it was difficult to make out; but he was rather inclined to chafe at Providence, which really does interfere so unjustifiably often, when things would go very well if they were left to themselves. The longer he thought of it, the more disgusted did he become—at once with Miss Blank and with her charge. What a cold-hearted wretch the woman must be! How strange that she should not at least 'take an interest' in the girl! To be sure he had made it a special point in her engagement that she should not take an interest. He was right in doing so, he felt sure; but, still, here was an unforeseen crisis, at which it would have been very important to have lighted on some one who would not be bound by a mere bargain. The girl was an unmanageable little fool, determined to have her own way at all risks; and the law would not permit him to shut her up, and keep her in the absolute subjection of a prison. She must have every advantage, forsooth—freedom and society, and Heaven knows what besides; education as much as if she were going to earn her living as a governess; and even that crowning horror, Lovers, when the time came. Yes, there was no law in the realm forbidding an heiress to have lovers. Miss Blank might resign, not wishing to compromise herself: but he, the unhappy guardian, could not resign. It was not illegal for a young man to speak to Kate—any idle fellow, with an introduction, might chatter to her, and drive her protectors frantic, and yet could not be put into prison for it. And there could be little doubt that, simply to spite her guardian, after she had worried him to death in every other way, she would fall in love. She would do it, as sure as fate; and even if she met with opposition she was a girl quite capable of eloping with her lover, giving unbounded trouble, and probably throwing some lasting stigma on herself and her name. It was premature, as Miss Blank said; but Miss Blank was a person of experience, learned in the ways of girls, and doubtless knew what she was saying. She had declined to have anything further to do

with Kate; she had declared her own sway and 'lovers' to be quite incompatible. But Mr. Courtenay could not give a month's warning, and what was he to do?

If there was but anybody to be found who would 'take an interest' in the girl! This idea flashed unconsciously through his mind, and he did not even realise that in wishing for this, in perceiving its necessity, he was stultifying all the previous exertions of his guardianship. Theories are all very well, but it is astonishing how ready men are to drop them in an emergency. Mr. Courtenay was in a dreadful emergency at present, and he prayed to his gods for some one to 'take an interest' in this girl. Her Aunt Anderson! The suggestion was so very convenient, it was so delightfully ready a way of escape out of his troubles, that he felt it necessary to pull himself up, and look at it fully. It is not to be supposed that it was a pleasant or grateful suggestion in itself. Had he been in no trouble about Kate, he would have at once, and sternly, declined all invitations (he would have said interference) on the part of her mother's family. The late Mr. Courtenay had made a very foolish marriage, a marriage quite beneath his position; and the sister of the late Mrs. Courtenay had been discouraged in all her many attempts to see anything of the orphan Kate. Fortunately she had not been much in England, and, until the present, these attempts had all been made when Kate was a baby. Had the young lady of Langton-Courtenay been at all manageable, they would have been equally discouraged now. But the very name of Mrs. Anderson, at this crisis, breathed across Mr. Courtenay's tribulations like the sweet south across a bed of violets. It was such a temptation to him as he did not know how to withstand. Her mother's family! They had no right, certainly, to any share of the good things, which were entirely on the Courtenay side; but certainly they had a right to their share of the trouble. This trouble he had borne for fifteen years, and had not murmured. Of course, in the very nature of things, it was their turn now.

Mr. Courtenay reflected very deeply on this subject, looking at it in all its details. Fortunately there were but few remnants of her mother's family. Mrs. Anderson was the widow of a Consul, who had spent almost all his life abroad. She had a pension, a little property, and an only daughter, a little older than Kate. There were but two of them. If they turned out to be of that locust tribe which Mr. Courtenay so feared and hated, they could at least be bought off cheaply, when they had served their purpose. The daughter, no doubt, would marry, and the mother could be bought off. Mr. Courtenay did not enter into any discussion with himself as to the probabilities of carrying out this scheme of buying off. At this moment he did not care to dwell upon any difficulties. In the meantime, he had the one great difficulty, Kate herself, to get settled somehow; and anything which might happen six years hence was so much less pressing. By that time a great many things unforeseen might have happened; and Mr. Courtenay did not choose to make so long an excursion into the unknown. What was he to do with her now? Was he to be compelled to stay in the country, to give up all his pleasures and comforts, and the habits of his life, in order to guard and watch over this girl?—or should she be given over, for the time, to the guardianship of her mother's family? This was the real question he had to decide.

And by degrees he came to think more and more cordially of Mrs. Anderson—more cordially, and, at the same time, contemptuously. What a fool she must be, to offer voluntarily to take all this trouble! No doubt she expected to make her own advantage out of it; but Mr. Courtenay, with a grim smile upon his countenance, felt that he himself was quite capable of taking care of that. He might employ her, but he would take care that her devotion should be disinterested. She would be better than a governess at this crisis of Kate's history! She would be a natural duenna and inspectress of morals, as well as the superintendent of education; and it should, of course, be fully impressed upon her that it was for her interest to discourage lovers, and keep the external world at arm's length. The very place of her residence was favourable. She had settled in the Isle of Wight, a long way from Langton-Courtenay, and happily so far from town that it would not be possible to run up and down and appeal to him at any moment. He thought of this all night, and it was the first subject that returned to his thoughts in the morning. Mrs. Anderson, or unlimited worry, trouble, and annoyance—banishment to the country, severance from all delights. Then let it be Mrs. Anderson! he said to himself, with a

sigh. It was hard upon him to have such a decision to make, and yet it was satisfactory to feel that he had decided for the best. He went down to breakfast with a certain solemn composure, as of a man who was doing right and making a sacrifice. It would be the salvation of his personal comfort, and to secure that, at all costs, was fundamentally and eternally right; but it was a sacrifice at once of pride and of principle, and he felt that he had a right to the honours of martyrdom on that score.

After breakfast he called his ward into the library, with a polite little speech of apology to Miss Blank. 'If you will permit me the pleasure of a few words with you at twelve o'clock, I think we may settle that little matter,' he said, with the greatest suavity; leaving upon that lady's mind the impression that Kate was to be bound hand and foot, and delivered over into her hands—which, as Miss Blank had no desire, could she avoid it, to leave the comfort of Langton-Courtenay, was very satisfactory to her; and then he withdrew into the library with the victim.

'Now, Kate,' he said, sitting down, 'I am going to speak to you very seriously.'

'You have been doing nothing but speak to me seriously ever since you came,' said Kate, pouting. 'I wish you would not give yourself so much trouble, Uncle Courtenay. All I want is just yes or no.'

'But a great deal depends on the yes or the no. Look here, Kate, I am willing to let you go—oh! pray don't clap your hands too soon!—I am willing to let you go, on conditions, and the conditions are rather serious. You had better not decide until you hear–'

'I am sure I shall not mind them,' said impetuous Kate, before whose eyes there instantly rose up a prospect of a new world, all full of freshness, and novelty, and interest. Mind!—she would not have minded fire and water to get at an existence which should be altogether new.

'Listen, however,' said Mr. Courtenay. 'My conditions are very grave. If you go to Mrs. Anderson, Kate–'

'Of course I shall go, if you will let me, Uncle Courtenay.'

'If you go,' said Mr. Courtenay, with a wave of his hand deprecating interruption, 'it must not be for a visit only—you must go to stay.'

'To stay!'

Kate's eyes, which grew round with the strain of wonder, interest, and excitement, and which kindled, and brightened, and shone, reflecting like a mirror the shades of feeling that passed through her mind, were a sight to see.

'If you go,' he continued, 'and if Mrs. Anderson is content to receive you, it must be for the remainder of your minority. I have had a great deal of trouble with your education, and now it is just that your mother's family should take their share. Hear me out, Kate. Your aunt, of course, should have an allowance for your maintenance, and you could have as many masters and governesses, and all the rest, as were necessary; but if you go out of my hands, you go not for six weeks, but for six years, Kate.'

Kate had been going to speak half a dozen times, but now, having controlled herself so long, she paused with a certain mixture of feelings. Her delight was certainly toned down. To go and come—to be now Queen of Langton, and now her aunt's amused and petted guest, had been her own dream of felicity. This was a different matter, there could be no doubt. It would be the old story—if not the monotony of Langton, which she knew, the monotony of Shanklin, which she did not know. Various clouds passed over the firmament which had looked so smiling. Perhaps it was possible her Aunt Anderson and Ombra might not turn out desirable companions for six years—perhaps she might regret her native place, her supremacy over the cottagers, whom she sometimes exasperated. The cloud thickened, dropped lower. 'Should I never be allowed to come back?—not even to *see* Langton, Uncle Courtenay?' she asked in a subdued voice.

'Langton, in that case, ought to be let or shut up.'

'Let!—to other people!—to strangers, Uncle Courtenay!—our house!'

‘Well, you foolish child, are we such very superior clay that we cannot let our house? Why, the best people in England do it. The Duke of Brentford does it. You have not quite his pretensions, and he does not mind.’

‘But I have quite his pretensions,’ cried Kate—‘more!—and so have you, uncle. What is he more than a gentleman? and we are gentlemen, I hope. Besides, a Duke has a vulgar sort of grandeur with his title—you know he has—and can do what he pleases; but we must act as gentlefolks. Oh! Uncle Courtenay, not that!’

‘Pshaw!’ was all that Mr. Courtenay replied. He was not open to sentimental considerations, especially when money was concerned; but, still, he had so much natural prejudice remaining in him for the race and honour of Langton-Courtenay, that he thought no worse of his troublesome ward for what she had said. He would of course pay no manner of attention to it; but still, on the whole, he liked her so to speak.

‘Let us waive the question,’ he resumed. ‘No, not to Langton-Courtenay—I don’t choose you should return here, if you quit it. But there might be change of air, once a year or so, to other places.’

‘Oh! might we go and travel?—might we go,’ cried Kate, looking up to him with shining eyes and eager looks, and lips apart, like an angelic petitioner, ‘abroad?’

She said this last word with such a fulness and roundness of sound, as it would be impossible, even in capitals, to convey through the medium of print.

‘Well,’ he said, with a smile, ‘probably that splendour and delight might be permitted to be—if you could afford it off your allowance, being always understood.’

‘Oh! of course we could afford it,’ said Kate. ‘Uncle, I consent at once—I will write to my Aunt Anderson at once. I wish she was not called Anderson—it sounds so common—like the groom in the village. Uncle Courtenay, when can I start? To-morrow? Now, why should you shake your head? I have very few things to pack; and to-morrow is just as good as any other day.’

‘Quite as good, I have no doubt; and so is to-morrow week,’ said Mr. Courtenay. ‘In the first place, you must take till to-morrow to decide.’

‘But when I have decided already!’ said Kate.

‘To-morrow at this time bring me your final answer. There, now run away—not another word.’

Kate went away, somewhat indignant; and for the next twenty-four hours did nothing but plan tours to all the beautiful places she had ever heard or read about. Her deliberations as to the scheme in general were all swallowed up in this. ‘I will take them to Switzerland; I will take them to Italy. We shall travel four or five months in every year; and see everything and hear everything, and enjoy everything,’ she said to herself, clapping her hands, as it were, under her breath. For she was generous in her way; she was quite clear on the point that it was she who must ‘take’ her aunt and cousin everywhere, and make everything agreeable for them. Perhaps there was in this a sense of superiority which satisfied that craving for power and influence which belonged to her nature; but still, notwithstanding her defective education, it was never in Kate’s mind to keep any enjoyment to herself.

CHAPTER IX

Before four-and-twenty hours had passed, a certain premonition of approaching change had stolen into the air at Langton-Courtenay. Miss Blank, too, had been received by Mr. Courtenay in a private audience, where he treated her with the courtesy due from one crowned head to another; but, nevertheless, gave her fully to understand that her reign was over. This took her all the more by surprise, that she had expected quite the reverse, from his words and looks in the morning; and it was perhaps an exclamation which burst from her as she withdrew, amazed and indignant, to her own room, which betrayed the possibilities of the future to the household. Miss Blank was not prone to exclamations, nor to betraying herself in any way; but to have your resignation blandly accepted, when you expected to be implored, almost with tears, to retain your post, is an experience likely to overcome the composure of any one. The exclamation itself was of the plainest character—it was, 'Oh! I like his politeness—I like that!' These words were heard by a passing housemaid; and not only were the words heard, but the flushed cheek, the indignant step, the air of injury were noted with all that keenness and intelligence which the domestic mind reserves for the study of the secrets of those above them. 'She's got the sack like the rest,' was Jane's remark to herself; and she spread it through the house. The intimation produced a mild interest, but no excitement. But when late in the afternoon Maryanne came rushing downstairs, open-mouthed, to report some unwary words which had dropped from her young mistress, the feelings of the household acquired immediate intensity. It was a suspecting place, and a poor sort of place, where there never were any great doings; but still Langton-Courtenay was a comfortable place, and when Maryanne, with that perverted keenness of apprehension already noticed, which made her so much more clever in divining her mistress's schemes than doing her mistress's work, had put Kate's broken words together, a universal alarm took possession of the house. The housemaid, and the kitchenmaid, and the individual who served in the capacity of man-of-all-work, shook in their shoes. Mrs. Cook, however, who was housekeeper as well, shook out her ample skirts, and declared that she did not mind. 'A house can't take care of itself,' she said, with noble confidence; 'and they ain't that clever to know now to get on without me.' The gardener, also, was easy in his mind, secure in the fact that 'the "place," must be kep' up;' but a thrill of tremulous expectation ran through all those who were liable to be sent away.

These fears were very speedily justified. In as short a time as the post permitted, Mr. Courtenay received an effusive and enthusiastic answer from Mrs. Anderson, to whom he had written very curtly, making his proposal. This proposal was that she should receive Kate, not as a visitor, but permanently, until she attained her majority, giving her what educational advantages were within her reach, getting masters for her, and everything that was needful; and, in short, taking entire charge of her. 'Circumstances prevent me from doing this myself,' he wrote; 'and, of course, a lady is better fitted to take charge of a girl at Kate's troublesome age than I can be.' And then he entered upon the subject of money. Kate would have an allowance of five hundred pounds a year. It was ridiculously large for a child like his niece, he thought to himself; but parsimony was not Mr. Courtenay's weakness. For this she was to have everything a girl could require, with the exception of society, which her guardian forbade. 'It is not my wish that she should be introduced to the world till she is of age, and I prefer to choose the time and the way myself,' he said. With these conditions and instructions, Kate was to go, if her aunt wished it, to the Cottage.

Mrs. Anderson's letter, as we have said, was enthusiastic. She asked, was she really to have her dearest sister's only child under her care? and appealed to heaven and earth to testify that her delight was unspeakable. She said that her desire could only be the welfare, in every point, of 'our darling niece!' That nobody could be more anxious than she was to see her grow up the image of her sweet mother, 'which, in my mind, means an example of every virtue and every grace!' She declared that were she rich enough to give Kate all the advantages she ought to have, she would prove to Mr.

Courtenay her perfect disinterestedness by refusing to accept any money with the dear child. But, for Kate's own sake, she must accept it; adding that the provision seemed to be both ample and liberal. Mrs. Anderson went on to say that masters of every kind came to a famous school in her neighbourhood, and that Mr. Courtenay might be quite sure of darling Kate's having every advantage. As for society, there was none, and he need be under no apprehension on that subject. She herself lived the quietest of lives, though of course she understood that, when Mr. Courtenay said society, he did not mean that she was to be interdicted from having a friend now and then to tea. This was the utmost extent of her dissipations, and she understood, as a matter of course, that he did not refer to anything of that description. She would come herself to London, she said, to receive from his hands 'our darling niece,' and he could perhaps then enter into further details as to anything he specially wished in reference to a subject on which their common interest was so great. Mr. Courtenay coughed very much over this letter—it gave him an irritation in his throat. 'The woman is a humbug as well as a fool!' he said to himself. But yet the question was—humbug or no humbug—was she the best person to free him of the charge of Kate? And, however he might resist, his judgment told him that this was the case.

The Rectory people came to return the visit of Mr. and Miss Courtenay while the house was in this confusion and commotion. They made a most decorous call at the proper hour, and in just the proper number—Mr. and Mrs. Hardwick, and one daughter. Kate had fallen from the momentary popularity which she had attained on her first appearance at the Rectory. She was now 'that interfering, disagreeable thing,' to the two girls. Nevertheless, as was right, in consideration of Miss Courtenay's age, Edith, the sensible one, accompanied her mother.

'I am the best one to go,' said Edith to her mother. 'For Minnie, I am sure, would lose her temper, and it is much best not to throw her into temptation.'

'You must be quite sure you can resist the temptation yourself,' said Mrs. Hardwick, who had brought up her children very well indeed, and had early taught them to identify and struggle against their specially besetting sins.

'You know, mamma, though I am sure I am a great deal worse in other things, this kind of temptation is not my danger,' said Edith; and with this satisfactory arrangement, the party took its way to the Hall.

Kate, in the flutter of joyous excitement which attended the new change in her fortunes, was quite a new creature—not the same who had called at the Rectory, and surprised and offended them. She had forgotten all about her own naughtiness. She seized upon Edith, and drew her into a corner, eager for a listener.

'Oh! do you know I am going away?' she said. 'Have you ever been away from home? Have you been abroad? Did you ever go to live among people whom you never saw before? That is what I am going to do.'

'Oh! I am so sorry for you!' said Edith, glad, as she afterwards explained to her mother, to be able to say something which should at once be amiable and true.

'Sorry!' said Kate—'oh! don't be sorry. I am very glad. I am going to my aunt, who is fond of me, though I never saw her. Going to people who are fond of you is different–'

'Are you fond of her?' said Edith.

'I never saw her,' said Kate, opening her eyes.

Here was an opportunity to be instructive such as seldom occurred, even in the schools where Miss Edith's gift was known. The young sage laid her hand upon Kate's, who was considerably surprised by the unlooked-for affectionateness. 'I am older than you,' said Edith—'I am quite grown up. You will not mind my speaking to you? Oh! do you know, dear, what is the best way to make people fond of you?'

'No.'

'To love them,' said Edith, with fervour. Kate looked at her with calm, reflective, fully-opened eyes.

'If you can,' she said—'but then how can you? Besides, it is their business to begin; they are older; they ought to know more about it—to be more in the way; Uncle Courtenay, for instance– I am sure you are very good—a great deal better than I am; but could you be fond of him?'

'If he was my uncle—if it was my duty,' said Edith.

'Oh! I don't know about duty,' said Kate, shaking back her abundant locks. The idea did not all commend itself to her mind. 'It is one's duty to learn lessons,' she went on, 'and keep one's temper, and not to talk too much, and that sort of thing; but to be fond of people– However, never mind; we can talk of that another time. We are going on Monday, and I never was out of Langton-Courtenay for a single night in all my life before.'

'Poor child!—what a trial for you!' said Edith.

At this moment Mrs. Hardwick struck in—'After the first is over, I am sure you will like it very much,' she said. 'It will be such a change. Of course it is always trying to leave home for the first time.'

'Trying!' cried Kate; and she rose up in the very restlessness of delight, with her eyes shining, and her hair streaming behind her. But what was the use of discussing it? Of course they could not understand. It was easier to show them over the house and the grounds than to explain her feelings to them. And both Mrs. Hardwick and Edith were deeply impressed by the splendour of Langton-Courtenay. They gave little glances at Kate of mingled surprise and admiration. After all, they felt, the possessor of such a place—the owner of the lands which stretched out as far as they could see—ought to be excused if she was a little different from other girls. 'What a temptation it must be!' Edith whispered to her mother; and it pleased Mrs. Hardwick to see how tolerant of other people's difficulties her child was. Kate grew quite excited by their admiration. She rushed over all the house, leading them into a hundred quaint corners. 'I shall fill it from top to bottom when I am of age,' she said. 'All those funny bedrooms have been so dreadfully quiet and lonely since ever I was born; but it shall be gay when my time comes.'

'Oh! hush, my dear,' said pious Mrs. Hardwick—'don't make so sure of the future, when we don't know what a day or an hour may bring forth.'

'Well,' said Kate, holding her position stoutly, 'if anything happens, of course there is an end of it; but if nothing happens—if I live, and all that—oh! I just wish I was one-and-twenty, to show you what I should do!'

'Do you think it will make you happy to be so gay?' said Edith, but with a certain wistful inquiry in her eyes, which was not like her old superiority.

'Oh! my dear children, hush!' repeated her mother—'don't talk like this. In the first place, gaiety is nothing—it is good neither for body nor soul; and besides, I cannot let you chatter so about the future. You will forgive me, my dear Miss Courtenay, for I am an old-fashioned person; but when we think how little we know about the future;—and your life will be an important one—a lesson and an example to so many. We ought to try to make ourselves of use to our fellow-creatures—and you must endeavour that the example should be a good one.'

'Fancy me an example!' said Kate, half to herself; and then she was silent, with a philosophy beyond her years. She did not attempt to argue; she had wit enough to see that it would be useless, and to pass on to another subject. But as she ran along the corridor, and into all the rooms, the thought of what she would make of them, when she came back, went like wine through her thrilling veins. She was glad to go away—far more glad than any one could imagine who had never lived the grey, monotonous routine of such an existence, uncheered by companions, unwarmed by love. But she would also be glad to come back—glad to enter splendidly, a young queen among her court. Her head was almost turned by this sublime idea. She would come back with new friends, new principles, new laws; she would be Queen absolute, without partner or help; she would be the lawgiver, redresser

of wrongs. Her supremacy would be beneficent as the reign of an ideal sovereign; but she *would* be supreme!

When her visitors left, she stood on the threshold of her own house, looking with shining eyes into that grand future. The shadows had all faded from her mind. She had almost forgotten, in the excitement of her new plans, all about Miss Blank's sharp words, and the people who hated her. It would have surprised her had any one called that old figment to her recollection. Hate! there was nothing like it in that future. There was power and beneficence, and mirth and brightness. There was everything that was gay, everything that was beautiful; smiles, and bright looks, and wit, and unbounded novelty; and herself the dispenser of everything pleasant, herself always supreme! This was the dream of the future which framed itself in Kate Courtenay's thoughts.

CHAPTER X

While all this agitation was going on over Kate's fate on one side, it is not to be supposed that there was no excitement on the other. Her two relations, the mother and daughter to whom she was about to be confided, were nearly as much disturbed as Kate herself by the prospect of receiving her. It might, indeed, be said to have disturbed them more, for it affected their entire life. They had lately returned to England, and settled down, after a wandering life, in a house of their own. They were not rich, but they had enough. They were not humble, but accustomed to think very well of themselves; and the fact was that, though Mrs. Anderson had, for many reasons, accepted Mr. Courtenay's proposal with enthusiasm, even she felt that the ideal seclusion she had been dreaming of was at once broken up—even she—and still more Ombra, her daughter, who was fanciful, and of a somewhat jealous and contradictory temper, fond of her own way, and of full freedom to carry her fancies out.

Mrs. Anderson, let us say at once, was neither a hypocrite nor a fool, and never, during their whole intercourse, regarded her heiress-niece as a means of drawing advantage to herself, or in a mercenary way. She was a warm-hearted, kind, and just woman; but she had her faults. The chief of these was a very excess of virtue. Her whole soul was set upon not being good only, but appearing so. She could not bear the idea of being deficient in any decorum, in any sentiment which society demanded. No one could have grieved more sincerely than she did for her husband; but a bitterer pang even than that caused her by natural sorrow would have gone through her heart, had she been tempted to smile through her tears a day sooner than public opinion warranted a widow to smile. In every position—even that in which she felt most truly—a sense of what society expected from her was always in her mind. This code of unwritten law went deeper with her even than nature. She had truly longed and yearned over Kate, in her kind heart, from the moment she had reached England; and had she followed her natural instincts, would have rushed at once to Langton-Courtenay, to see the child who was all that remained of a sister whom she had loved. But the world, in that case, would have said that she meant to establish herself at Langton-Courtenay, and that her affection for her niece was feigned or mercenary.

'Let her alone, then,' Ombra said. 'Why should we trouble ourselves? If her friends think we are not good enough for her, let her alone. Why should she think herself better than we?'

'My love, she is very young,' said Mrs. Anderson; 'and, besides, if I took no notice at all of Catherine's only child, what would people suppose? It would be thought either that I had a guilty conscience in respect to the Courtenays, or that I had been repulsed. Nobody would believe that we had simply let her alone, as you say; and, besides, I am longing to see Kate with all my heart.

'What does it matter what people say?' said Ombra. 'I do not see what any one has to do with our private affairs.'

'That is a great delusion,' said Mrs. Anderson, shaking her head; 'every one has to do with every one else's private affairs. If you do not wish to lay yourself open to remark, you will always keep this in mind. And our position is very trying, between your cousin's wealth and our love for her–'

'I don't think I have very much love for her, mamma.'

'My dear child, don't let any one but me hear you say so. She ought to be like a sister to you,' said Mrs. Anderson.

And Ombra let the discussion drop, and permitted her mother, in this respect, to have her own way. But she was not in any respect of her mother's way of thinking. Her temptation was to hate and despise the opinion of society just in proportion to the reverence for it which she had been bred in: a result usual enough with clear-sighted and impetuous young persons, conscious of the defects of their parents. Ombra was a pretty, gentle, soft-mannered girl in outward appearance; but a certain almost fierce independence and determination to guide her own course as she herself pleased, was

in her heart. She would not be influenced, as her mother had been, by other people's ideas. She thought, with some recent writers, that the doctrine of self-sacrifice, as taught specially to women, was altogether false, vain, and miserable. She felt that she herself ought to be first in her home and sphere; and she did not feel disposed even to share with, much less to yield to, the rich cousin whom she had never seen. She shrugged her shoulders over Mrs. Anderson's letter to Kate, but she did not interfere further, until Mr. Courtenay's astounding proposal arrived, fluttering the household as a hawk would flutter the dovecots. At the first reading, it drove Ombra frantic. It was impossible, out of the question, not to be thought of for a moment! In this small house, with their two maids, in the quiet of Shanklin, what were they to do with a self-important girl, a creature, no doubt, bred from her cradle to a consciousness of her own greatness, and who wanted all sorts of masters and advantages? Mrs. Anderson knew how to manage her daughter, and for the moment she allowed her to have her way, and pour forth her indignation. The letter came by the early post; and it was only when they were seated at tea in the evening that she brought forward the other side of the question.

'What you say is all very true, Ombra; but we have two spare bedrooms—there would still be one left for a friend, even if we took in poor dear little Kate.'

'Poor Kate! Why is she poor? She could buy us over and over,' said Ombra, in her indignation.

'Buy what?' said her clever mother—'our love?'

'Mamma, please don't speak any nonsense about love!' said Ombra, hastily. 'I can't love people at a moment's notice; because a girl whom I never saw happens to be the child of my aunt, whom I never saw–'

'Then suppose we leave you out,' said her mother. 'She is the child of my sister, whom I knew well, and was very fond of—that alters the question so far as I am concerned.'

'Oh! of course, mamma,' said Ombra, with darkened brows, 'I do not pretend to do more than give my opinion. It is for you to say how it is to be.'

'Do you think I can make a decision without you?' said the mother, pathetically. 'You must try to look at it more reasonably, my dear. Next to you, Kate is the creature most near to me in the world—next to me. Now, listen, Ombra; she is your nearest relation. Think what it will be to have a friend and a sister if anything should happen to me. The house is small, but we cannot truly say that we have not room for a little girl of fifteen in it. And then think of her loneliness—not a soul to care for her, except that old Mr. Courtenay–'

'Oh! that is nonsense; she must have some one to care for her, or else she must be intensely disagreeable,' said Ombra. 'Mamma, remember what I say—if we take her in, we shall repent it all our lives.'

'Nothing of the sort, my dear,' said Mrs. Anderson, eagerly following up this softened opposition. 'Why she is only fifteen—a mere child!—we can mould her as we will. And then, my dearest child, though heaven knows it is not interest I am thinking of, still it will be a great advantage; our income will be doubled. I must say Mr. Courtenay is very liberal, if nothing else. We shall be able to do many things that we could not do otherwise. Why, Ombra, you look as if you thought I meant to rob your cousin–'

'I would not use a penny of her allowance—it should be all spent upon herself!' cried the girl, flushing with indignant passion. 'Our income doubled! Mamma, what can you be thinking of? Do you suppose I could endure to be a morsel the better for *that* Kate?'

'You are a little fool, and there is no talking to you,' said Mrs. Anderson, with natural impatience; and for half an hour they did not speak to each other. This, however, could not last very long, for providentially, as Mrs. Anderson said, one of the Rectory girls came in at the time when it was usual for the ladies to take their morning walk, and she would not for all the Isle of Wight have permitted Elsie to see that her child and she were not on their usual terms. When Elsie had left them, a slight relapse was threatened, but they were then walking together along the cliff, with one of the

loveliest of landscapes before them—the sun setting, the ruddy glory lighting up Sandown Bay, and all the earth and sea watching that last crisis and climax of the day.

'Oh! there is the true daffodil sky!' Ombra exclaimed, in spite of herself, and the breach was healed. It was she herself who resumed the subject some time later, when they turned towards home. 'I do not see,' she said abruptly, 'what we could do about masters for *that* girl, if she were to come here. To have them down from town would be ruinous, and to be constantly going up to town with her—to you, who so hate the ferry—would be dreadful!'

'My love, you forget Miss Story's school, where they have all the best masters,' said Mrs. Anderson, mildly.

'You could not send her to school.'

'But they would come to us, my dear. Of course they would be very glad to come to us for a little more money, and I should gladly take the opportunity for your music, Ombra. I thought of that. I wish everything could be settled as easily. If you only saw the matter as I do–'

'There is another thing,' said Ombra, hastily, 'which does not matter to me, for I hate society; but if she is to be kept like a nun, and never to see any one–'

Mrs. Anderson smiled serenely. 'My love, who is there to see?—the Rectory children and a few ladies—people whom we ask to tea. Of course, I would not think of taking her to balls or even dinner-parties; but then, I never go to dinner-parties—there is no one to ask us; and as for balls, Ombra, you know what you said about that nice ball at Ryde.'

'I hate them!' said Ombra, vehemently. 'I hope I shall never be forced to go to another in all my life.'

'Then that question is settled very easily,' said Mrs. Anderson, without allowing any signs of triumph to appear in her face. And next day she wrote to Mr. Courtenay, as has been described. When she wrote about 'our darling niece,' the tears were in her eyes. She meant it with all her heart; but, at the same time, it was the right thing to say, and to be anxious and eager to receive the orphan were the right sentiments to entertain. 'It is the most proper arrangement,' she said afterwards to the Rector's wife, who was her nearest neighbour. 'Of course her mother's sister is her most natural guardian. The property is far best in Mr. Courtenay's hands; but the child herself–'

'Poor child!' said Mrs. Eldridge, looking at her own children, who were many, and thinking within herself that to trust them to any one, even an aunt–

'Yes, poor child!' cried Mrs. Anderson, with the tears in her eyes; 'and my Catherine would have made such a mother! But we must do what we can to make it up to her. She will have some one at least to love her here.'

'I am sure you will be—good to her,' said the Rector's wife, looking wistfully, in her pity, into the face of the woman who, to her simple mind, did protest too much. Mrs. Eldridge felt, as many a straightforward person does, that her neighbour's extreme propriety, and regard for what was befitting and 'expected of her,' was the mask of insincerity. She did not understand the existence of true feeling beneath all that careful exterior. But she was puzzled and touched for the moment by the tears in her companion's eyes.

'You can't get up tears, you know, when you will,' she said to her husband, when they discussed poor Kate's prospects of happiness in her aunt's house, that same night.

'I can't,' said the Rector, 'nor you; but one has heard of crocodile tears!'

'Oh! Fred, no—not so bad as that!'

But still both these good people distrusted Mrs. Anderson, through her very anxiety to do right, and show that she was doing it. They were afraid of her excess of virtue. The exaggeration of the true seemed to them false. And they even doubted the amount of Kate's allowance, because of the aunt's frankness in telling them of it. They thought her intention was to raise her own and her niece's importance, and calculated among themselves what the real sum was likely to be. Poor Mrs. Anderson! everybody was unjust to her—even her daughter—on this point.

But it was with no sense of this general distrust, but, on the contrary, with the most genial sense of having done everything that could be required of her, that she left home on a sunny June morning, with her heart beating quicker than usual in her breast, to bring home her charge. Her heart was beating partly out of excitement to see Kate, and partly out of anxiety about the crossing from Ryde, which she hated. The sea looked calm, from Sandown, but Mrs. Anderson knew, by long experience, that the treacherous sea has a way of looking calm until you have trusted yourself to its tender mercies. This thought, along with her eagerness to see her sister's child, made her heart beat.

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Courtenay had stipulated that Kate was to be met by her aunt, not at his house, but at the railway, and to continue her journey at once. His house, he said, was shut up; but his real reason was reluctance to establish any precedent or pretext for other invasions. Kate started in the very highest spirits, scarcely able to contain herself, running over with talk and laughter, making a perpetual comment upon all that passed before her. Even Miss Blank's sinister congratulations, when she took leave of the little travelling party, 'I am sure I wish you joy, sir, and I wish Mrs. Anderson joy!' did not damp Kate's spirits. 'I shall tell my aunt, Miss Blank, and I am sure she will be much obliged to you,' the girl said, as she took her seat in the carriage. And Maryanne, who, red and excited, was seated by her, tittered in sympathy.

When Mr. Courtenay hid himself behind a newspaper, it was on Maryanne that Kate poured forth the tide of her excitement. 'Isn't it delightful!' she said, a hundred times over. 'Oh! yes, miss; but father and mother!' Maryanne answered, with a sob. Kate contemplated her gravely for twenty seconds. Here was a difference, a distinction, which she did not understand. But before the minute was half over her thoughts had gone abroad again in a confusion of expectancy and pleasure. She leant half out of the window, casting eager glances upon the people who were waiting the arrival of the train at the station. The first figure upon which she set her eyes was that of a squat old woman in a red and yellow shawl. 'Oh! can that be my aunt?' Kate said to herself, with dismay. The next was a white-haired, substantial old lady, old enough to be Mrs. Anderson's mother. 'This is she! She is nice! I shall be fond of her!' cried Kate to herself. When the white-haired lady found some one else, Kate's heart sank. Oh! where was the new guardian?

'Miss Kate! oh! please, Miss Kate!' said Maryanne; and turning sharply round, Kate found herself in somebody's arms. She had not time to see who it was; she felt only a warm darkness surround her, the pressure of something which held her close, and a voice murmuring, 'My darling child! my Catherine's child!' murmuring and purring over her. Kate had time to think, 'Oh! how tall she is! Oh! how warm! Oh! how funny!' before she was let loose and kissed—which latter process allowed her to see a tall woman, not in the least like the white-haired grandmother whom she had fixed upon—a woman not old, with hair of Kate's own colour, smiles on her face, and tears in her eyes.

'Let me look at you, my sweet! I should have known you anywhere. You are so like your darling mother!' said the new aunt. And then she wept; and then she said, 'Is it you? Is it really you, my Kate?' And all this took place at the station, with Uncle Courtenay sneering hard by, and strangers looking on.

'Yes, aunt, of course it is me,' said Kate, who scorned grammar; 'who should it be? I came expressly to meet you; and Uncle Courtenay is there, who will tell you it is all right.'

'Dearest! as if I had any need of your Uncle Courtenay,' said Mrs. Anderson; and she kissed her over again, and cried once more, most honest but inappropriate tears.

'Are you sorry?' cried Kate, in surprise; 'because I am glad, very glad to see you. I could not cry for anything—I am as happy as I can be.'

'You darling!' said Mrs. Anderson. 'But you are right, it is too public here. I must take you away to have some luncheon, too, my precious child. There is no time to lose. Oh! Kate, Kate, to think I should have you at last, after so many years!'

'I hope you will be pleased with me now, aunt,' said Kate, a little alarm mingling with her surprise. Was she worth all this fuss? It was fuss; but Kate had no constitutional objection to fuss, and it was pleasant, on the whole. After all the snubbing she had gone through, it was balm to her to be received so warmly; even though the cynicism which she had been trained into was moved by a certain sense of the ludicrous, too.

‘Kate says well,’ said old Mr. Courtenay. ‘I hope you will be pleased with her, now you have her. To some of us she has been a sufficiently troublesome child; but I trust in your hands—your more skilful hands–’

‘I am not afraid,’ said Mrs. Anderson, with a very suave smile; ‘and even if she were troublesome, I should be glad to have her. But we start directly; and the child must have some luncheon. Will you join us, or must we say good-bye? for we shall not be at home till after dinner, and at present Kate must have something to eat?’

‘I have an engagement,’ said Mr. Courtenay, hastily. What! he lunch at a railway station with a girl of fifteen and this unknown woman, who, by the way, was rather handsome after her fashion! What a fool she must be to think of such a thing! He bowed himself off very politely, with an assurance that now his mind was easy about his ward. She must write to him, he said and let him know in a few days how she liked Shanklin; but in the meantime he was compelled to hurry away.

When Kate felt herself thus stranded as it were upon an utterly lonely and unknown shore, in the hands of a woman she had never seen before, and the last familiar face withdrawn, there ran a little pain, a little thrill, half of excitement, half of dismay, in her heart. She clutched at Maryanne, who stood behind her; she examined once again, with keen eyes, the new guide of her life. This was novelty indeed!—but novelty so sharp and sudden that it took away her breath. Mrs. Anderson’s tone had been very different to her uncle from what it was to herself. What did this mean? Kate was bewildered, half frightened, stunned by the change, and she could not make it out.

‘My dear, I am sure your uncle has a great many engagements,’ said Mrs. Anderson; ‘gentlemen who are in society have so many claims upon them, especially at this time of the year; or perhaps he thought it kindest to let us make friends by ourselves. Of course he must be very fond of you, dear; and I must always be grateful for his good opinion: without that he would not have trusted his treasure in my hands.’

‘Aunt Anderson,’ said Kate, hastily, ‘please don’t make a mistake. I am sure I am no treasure at all to him, but only a trouble and a nuisance. You must not think so well of me as that. He thought me a great trouble, and he was very glad to get rid of me. I know this is true.’

Mrs. Anderson only smiled. She put her arm through the girl’s, and led her away. ‘We will not discuss the question, my darling, for you must have something to eat. When did you leave Langton? Our train starts at two—we have not much time to lose. Are you hungry? Oh! Kate, how glad I am to have you! How very glad I am! You have your mother’s very eyes.’

‘Then don’t cry, aunt, if you are glad.’

‘It is because I am glad, you silly child. Come in here, and give me one good kiss. And now, dear, we will have a little cold chicken, and get settled in the carriage before the crowd comes.’

And how different was the second part of this journey! Mrs. Anderson got no newspaper—she sat opposite to Kate, and smiled at all she said. She told her the names of the places they were passing; she was alive to every light and shade that passed over her young, changeable face. Then Kate fell silent all at once, and began to think, and cast many a furtive look at her new-found relation; at last she said, in a low voice, and with a certain anxiety—

‘Aunt, is it possible that I could remember mamma?’

‘Ah! no, Kate; she died just when you were born.’

‘Then did I ever see you before?’

‘Never since you were a little baby—never that you could know.’

‘It is very strange,’ the girl said half to herself; ‘but I surely know some face like yours. Ah! could it be *that*?’ She stopped, and her face flushed up to her hair.

‘Could it be what, dear?’

Then Kate laughed out—the softest, most musical, tender little laugh that ever came from her lips. ‘I know,’ she said—‘it is myself!’

Mrs. Anderson blushed, too, with sudden pleasure. It was a positive happiness to her, penetrating beneath all her little proprieties and pretensions. She took the girl's hands, and bending forward, looked at her in the face; and it was true—they were as like as if they had been mother and daughter—though the elder had toned down, and lost that glory of complexion, that brightness of intelligence; and the younger was brighter, quicker, more intelligent than her predecessor had ever been. This made at once the sweetest, most pleasant link between them; it bound them together by Nature's warm and visible bond. They were both proud of this tie, which could be seen in their faces, which they could not throw off nor cast away.

But after the ferry was crossed—when they were drawing near Shanklin—a silence fell upon both. Kate, with a quite new-born timidity, was shy of inquiring about her cousin; and Mrs. Anderson was too doubtful of Ombra's mood to say more of her than she could help. She longed to be able to say, 'Ombra will be sure to meet us,' but did not dare. And Ombra did not meet them; she was not to be seen, even, as they walked up to the house. It was a pretty cottage, embowered in luxuriant leafage, just under the shelter of the cliff, and looking out over its own lawn, and a thread of quiet road, and the slopes of the Undercliff, upon the distant sea. There was, however, no one at the door, no one at any of the windows, no trace that they were expected, and Mrs. Anderson's heart was wrung by the sight. Naturally she grew at once more prodigal of her welcomes and caresses. 'How glad I am to see you here, my darling Kate! This is your home, dear child. As long as I live, whenever you may want it, my humble house will be yours from this day—always remember that; and welcome, my darling,—welcome home!'

Kate accepted the kisses, but her thoughts were far away. Where was the other who should have given her a welcome too? All the girl's eager soul rushed upon this new track. Did Ombra object to her?—why was not she here? Ombra's mother, though she said nothing, had given many anxious glances round her, which were not lost upon Kate's keen perceptions? Could Ombra object to the intruder? After all her aunt's effusions, this was a new idea to Kate.

The door was thrown open by a little woman in a curious headdress, made out of a coloured handkerchief, whose appearance filled Kate with amazement, and whose burst of greeting she could not for the first moment understand. Kate's eyes went over her shoulder to a commonplace English housemaid behind with a sense of relief. 'Oh! how the young lady is welcome!' cried old Francesca. 'How she is as the light to our eyes!—and how like our padrona—how like! Come in—come in; your chamber is ready, little angel. Oh! how bella, bella our lady must have been at that age!'

'Hush, Francesca; do not put nonsense into the child's head,' said Mrs. Anderson, still looking anxiously round.

'I judge from what I see,' said the old woman; and then she added, in answer to a question from her mistress's eyes, 'Meess Ombra has the bad head again. It was I that made her put herself to bed. I made the room dark, and gave her the tea, as madam herself does it, otherwise she would be here to kiss this new angel, and bid her the welcome. Come in, come in, *carissima*; come up, I will show you the chamber. Ah! our signorina has not been able to keep still when she heard you, though she has the bad head, the very bad head.'

And then there appeared to Kate, coming downstairs, the slight figure of a girl in a black dress—a girl whom, at the first moment, she thought younger than herself. Ombra was not at all like her mother—she was like her name, a shadowy creature, with no light about her—not even in the doubtful face, pale and fair, which her cousin gazed upon so curiously. She said nothing till she had come up to them, and did not quicken her pace in the least, though they were all gazing at her. To fill up this pause, Mrs. Anderson, who was a great deal more energetic and more impressionable than her daughter, rushed to her across the little hall.

'My darling, are you ill? I know only that could have prevented you from coming to meet your cousin. Here she is, Ombra mia; here we have her at last—my sweet Kate! Now love each other,

girls; be as your mothers were; open your hearts to each other. Oh! my dear children, if you but knew how I love you both!'

And Mrs. Anderson cried while the two stood holding each other's hands, looking at each other —on Kate's side with violent curiosity; on Ombra's apparently with indifference. The mother had to do all the emotion that was necessary, with an impulse which was partly love, and partly vexation, and partly a hope to kindle in them the feelings that became the occasion.

'How do you do? I am glad to see you. I hope you will like Shanklin,' said chilly Ombra.

'Thanks,' said Kate; and they dropped each other's hands; while poor Mrs. Anderson wept unavailing tears, and old Francesca, in sympathy, fluttered about the new 'little angel,' taking off her cloak, and uttering aloud her admiration and delight. It was a strange beginning to Kate's new life.

'I wonder, I wonder–' the new-comer said to herself when she was safely housed for the night, and alone. Kate had seated herself at the window, from whence a gleam of moon and sky was visible, half veiled in clouds. She was in her dressing-gown, and with her hair all over her shoulders, was a pretty figure to behold, had there been any one to see. 'I wonder, I wonder!' she said to herself. But she could not have put into words what her wonderings were. There was only in them an indefinite sense that something not quite apparent had run on beneath the surface in this welcome of hers. She could not tell what it was—why her aunt should have wept; why Ombra should have been so different. Was it the ready tears of the one that chilled the other? Kate was not clear enough on the subject to ask herself this question. She only wondered, feeling there was something more than met the eye. But, on the whole, the child was happy—she had been kissed and blessed when she came upstairs; she seemed to be surrounded with an atmosphere of love and care. There was nobody (except Ombra) indifferent —everybody cared; all were interested. She wondered—but at fifteen one does not demand an answer to all the indefinite wonderings which arise in one's heart; and, despite of Ombra, Kate's heart was lighter than it had ever been (she thought) in all her life. Everything was strange, new, unknown to her, yet it was home. And this is a paradox which is always sweet.

CHAPTER XII

There was something that might almost have been called a quarrel downstairs that night over the new arrival. Ombra was cross, and her mother was displeased; but Mrs. Anderson had far too strong a sense of propriety to suffer herself to scold. When she said 'I am disappointed in you, Ombra. I have seldom been more wounded than when I came to the door, and did not find you,' she had done all that occurred to her in the way of reproof.

'But I had a headache, mamma.'

'We must speak to the doctor about your headaches,' said Mrs. Anderson; and Ombra, with something like sullenness, went to bed.

But she was not to escape so easily. Old Francesca had been Ombra's nurse. She was not so very old, but had aged, as peasant women of her nation do. She was a Tuscan born, with the shrill and high-pitched voice natural to her district, and she had followed the fortunes of the Andersons all over the world, from the time of her nursling's birth. She was, in consequence, a most faithful servant and friend, knowing no interests but those of her mistress, but at the same time a most uncompromising monitor. Ombra knew what was in store for her, as soon as she discovered Francesca, with her back turned, folding up the dress she had worn in the morning. The chances are that Ombra would have fled, had she been able to do so noiselessly, but she had already betrayed herself by closing the door.

'Francesca,' she said, affecting an ease which she did not feel, 'are you still here? Are you not in bed? You will tire yourself out. Never mind those things. I will put them away myself.'

'The things might be indifferent to me,' said Francesca, turning round upon her, 'but you are not. My young lady, I have a great deal to say to you.'

This conversation was chiefly in Italian, both the interlocutors changing, as pleased them, from one language to another; but as it is unnecessary to cumber the page with italics, or the reader's mind with two languages, I will take the liberty of putting it in English, though in so doing I may wrong Francesca's phrases. When her old nurse addressed her thus, Ombra trembled—half in reality because she was a chilly being, and half by way of rousing her companion's sympathy. But Francesca was ruthless.

'You have the cold, I perceive,' she said, 'and deserve to have it. Seems to me that if you thought sometimes of putting a little warmth in your heart, instead of covering upon your body, that would answer better. What has the little cousin done, *Dio mio*, to make you as if you had been for a night on the mountains? I look to see the big ice-drop hanging from your fingers, and the snow-flakes in your hair! You have the cold!—bah! you *are* the cold!—it is in you!—it freezes! I, whose blood is in your veins, I stretch out my hand to get warm, and I chill, I freeze, I die!'

'I am Ombra,' said the girl, with a smile, 'you know; how can I warm you, Francesca? It is not my nature.'

'Are you not, then, God's making, because they have given you a foolish name?' cried Francesca. 'The Ombra I love, she is the Ombra that is cool, that is sweet, that brings life when one comes out of a blazing sun. You say the sun does not blaze here; but what is *here*, after all? A piece of the world which God made! When you were little, Santissima Madonna! you were sweet as an olive orchard; but now you are sombre and dark, like a pine-wood on the Apennines. I will call you 'Ghiaccia,'[1] not Ombra any more.'

'It was not my fault. You are unjust. I had a headache. You said so yourself.'

'Ah, *disgraziata*! I said it to shield you. You have brought upon my conscience a great big—what you call fib. I hope my good priest will not say it was a lie!'

[1] Ice.

'I did not ask you to do it,' cried Ombra. 'And then there was mamma, crying over that girl as if there never had been anything like her before!'

'The dear lady! she did it as I did, to cover your coldness—your look of ice. Can we bear that the world should see what a snow-maiden we have between us? We did it for your sake, ungrateful one, that no one should see–'

'I wish you would let me alone,' said Ombra; and though she was seventeen—two years older than Kate—and had a high sense of her dignity, she began to cry. 'If you only would be true, I should not mind; but you have so much effusion—you say more than you mean, both mamma and you.'

'Seems to me that it is better to be too kind than too cold,' said Francesca, indignantly. 'And this poor little angel, the orphan, the child of the Madonna—ah! you have not that thought in your icy Protestant; but among us Christians every orphan is Madonna's child. How could I love the holiest mother, if I did not love her child? Bah! you know better, but you will not allow it. Is it best, tell me, to wound the *poverina* with your too little, or to make her warm and glad with our too mooch?—even if it were the too mooch,' said Francesca, half apologetically; 'though there is nothing that is too mooch, if it is permitted me to say it, for the motherless one—the orphan—the Madonna's child!'

Ombra made no reply; she shrugged her shoulders, and began to let down her hair out of its bands—the worst of the storm was over.

But Francesca had reserved herself for one parting blaze, 'And know you, my young lady, what will come to you, if thus you proceed in your life?' she said. 'When one wanders too mooch on the snowy mountains, one falls into an ice-pit, and one dies. It will so come to you. You will grow colder and colder, colder and colder. When it is for your good to be warm, you will be ice: you will not be able more to help yourself. You will make love freeze up like the water in the torrent; you will lay it in a tomb of snow, you will build the ice-monument over it, and then all you can do will be vain—it will live no more. Signorina Ghiaccia, if thus you go on, this is what will come to you.'

And with this parting address, Francesca darted forth, not disdaining, like a mere mortal and English domestic, to shut the door with some violence. Ombra had her cry out by herself, while Kate sat wondering in the next room. The elder girl asked herself, was it true?—was she really a snow-maiden, or was it some mysterious influence from her name that threw this shade over her, and made her so contradictory and burdensome even to herself?

For Ombra was not aware that she had been christened by a much more sober name. She stood as Jane Catherine in the books of the Leghorn chaplain—a conjunction of respectable appellatives which could not have any sinister influence. I doubt, however, whether she would have taken any comfort from this fact; for it was pleasant to think of herself as born under some wayward star—a shadowy creature, unlike common flesh and blood, half Italian, half spirit. 'How can I help it?' she said to herself. The people about her did not understand her—not even her mother and Francesca. They put the commonplace flesh-and-blood girl on a level with her—this Kate, with half-red hair, with shallow, bright eyes, with all that red and white that people rave about in foolish books. 'Kate will be the heroine wherever we go,' she said, with a smile, which had more pain than pleasure in it. She was a little jealous, a little cross, disturbed in her fanciful soul; and yet she was not heartless and cold, as people thought. The accusation wounded her, and haunted her as if with premonitions of reproaches to come. It was not hard to bear from Francesca, who was her devoted slave; but it occurred dimly to Ombra, as if in prophecy, that the time would come when she should hear the same words from other voices. Not Ombra-Ghiaccia! Was it possible? Could that fear ever come true?

Mrs. Anderson, for her part, was less easy about this change in her household than she would allow. When she was alone, the smiles went off her countenance. Kate, though she had been so glad to see her, though the likeness to herself had made so immediate a bond between them, was evidently enough not the kind of girl who could be easily managed, or who was likely to settle down quietly into domestic peace and order. She had the makings of a great lady in her, an independent, high-spirited princess, to whom it was not necessary to consider the rules which are made for humbler

maidens. Already she had told her aunt what she meant to do at Langton when she went back; already she had inquired with lively curiosity all about Shanklin. Mrs. Anderson thought of her two critics at the Rectory, who, she knew by instinct, were ready to pick holes in her, and be hard upon her 'foreign ways,' and trembled for her niece's probable vagaries. It was 'a great responsibility,' a 'trying position,' for herself. Many a 'trying position' she had been in already, the difficulties of which she had surmounted triumphantly. She could only hope that 'proper feeling,' 'proper respect' for the usages of society, would bring her once more safely through. When Francesca darted in upon her, fresh from the lecture she had delivered, Mrs. Anderson's disturbed look at once betrayed her.

'My lady looks as she used to look when the big letters came, saying Go,' said Francesca; 'but, courage, Signora mia, the big letters come no more.'

'No; nor he who received them, Francesca,' said the mistress, sadly. 'But it was not that I was thinking of—it was my new care, my new responsibility.'

'Bah!' cried Francesca; 'my lady will pardon me, I did not mean to be rude. Ah! if my lady was but a Christian like us other Italians! Why there never came an orphan into a kind house, but she brought a blessing. The dear Madonna will never let trouble come to you from her child; and, besides, the little angel is exactly like you. Just so must my lady have looked at her age—beautiful as the day.'

'Ah! Francesca, you are partial,' said Mrs. Anderson, with, however, a returning smile. 'I never was so pretty as Kate.'

'My lady will pardon me,' said Francesca, with quiet gravity; 'in my eyes, *senza complimenti*, there is no one so beautiful as my lady even now.'

This statement was much too serious and superior to compliment-making, to be answered, especially as Francesca turned at once to the window, to close the shutters, and make all safe for the night.

CHAPTER XIII

Mrs. Anderson's house was situated in one of those nests of warmth and verdure which are characteristic of the Isle of Wight. There was a white cliff behind, partially veiled with turf and bushes, the remains of an ancient landslip. The green slope which formed its base, and which, in Spring, was carpeted with wild-flowers, descended into the sheltered sunny garden, which made a fringe of flowers and greenness round the cottage. On that side there was no need of fence or boundary. A wild little rustic flight of steps led upward to the winding mountain-path which led to the brow of the cliff, and the cliff itself thus became the property of the little house. Both cottage and garden were small, but the one was a mass of flowers, and the airy brightness and lightness of the other made up for its tiny size. The windows of the little drawing-room opened into the rustic verandah, all garlanded with climbing plants; and though the view was not very great, nothing but flowers and verdure, a bit of quiet road, a glimpse of blue sea, yet from the cliff there was a noble prospect—all Sandown Bay, with its white promontory, and the wide stretch of water, sometimes blue as sapphire, though grey enough when the wind brought it in, in huge rollers upon the strand. The sight, and sound, and scent of the sea were all alike new to Kate. The murmur in her ears day and night, now soft, like the hu-ush of a mother to a child, now thundering like artillery, now gay as laughter, delighted the young soul which was athirst for novelty. Here was something which was always new. There was no limit to her enjoyment of the sea. She liked it when wild and when calm, and whatever might be its vagaries, and in all her trials of temper, which occurred now and then, fled to it for soothing. The whole place, indeed, seemed to be made especially for Kate. It suited her to climb steep places, to run down slopes, to be always going up or down, with continual movement of her blood and stir of her spirits. She declared aloud that this was what she had wanted all her life—not flat parks and flowers, but the rising waves to pursue her when she ventured too close to them, the falling tide to open up sweet pools and mysteries, and penetrate her with the wholesome breath of the salt, delightful beach.

'I don't know how I have lived all this time away from it. I must have been born for the seaside!' she cried, as she walked on the sands with her two companions.

Ombra, for her part, shrugged her shoulders, and drew her shawl closer. She had already decided that Kate was one of the race of extravagant talkers, who say more than they feel.

'The sea is very nice,' said Mrs. Anderson, who in this respect was not so enthusiastic as Kate.

'Very nice! Oh! aunt, it is simply delightful! Whenever I am troublesome—as I know I shall be—just send me out here. I may talk all the nonsense I like—it will never tire the sea.'

'Do you talk a great deal of nonsense, Kate?'

'I am afraid I do,' said the girl, with penitence. 'Not that I mean it; but what is one to do? Miss Blank, my last governess, never talked at all, when she could help it, and silence is terrible—anything is better than that; and she said I chattered, and was always interfering. What could I do? One must be occupied about something!'

'But are you fond of interfering, dear?'

'Auntie!' said Kate, throwing back her hair, 'if I tell you the very worst of myself, you will not give me up, or send me away? Thanks! It is enough for me to be sure of that. Well, perhaps I am, a little—I mean I like to be doing something, or talking about something. I like to have something even to think about. You can't think of Mangnall's Questions, now, can you?—or Mrs. Markham? The village people used to be a great deal more interesting. I used to like to hear all that was going on, and give them my advice. Well, I suppose it was not very good advice. But I was not a nobody there to be laughed at, you know, auntie—I was the chief person in the place!'

Here Ombra laughed, and it hurt Kate's feelings.

'When I am old enough, I shall be able to do as I please in Langton-Courtenay,' she said.

‘Certainly, my love,’ said Mrs. Anderson, interposing; ‘and I hope, in the meantime, dear, you will think a great deal of your responsibilities, and all that is necessary to make you fill such a trying position as you ought.’

‘Trying!’ said Kate, with some surprise; ‘do you think it will be trying? I shall like it better than anything. Poor old people, I must try to make it up to them, for perhaps I rather bothered them sometimes, to tell the truth. I am not like you and Ombra, so gentle and nice. And, then, I had never seen people behave as I suppose they ought.’

‘I am glad you think we behave as we ought, Kate.’

‘Oh! auntie; but then there is something about Ombra that makes me ashamed of myself. She is never noisy, nor dreadful, like me. She touches things so softly, and speaks so gently. Isn’t she lovely, aunt?’

‘She is lovely to me,’ said Mrs. Anderson, with a glow of pleasure. ‘And I am so glad you like your cousin, Kate.’

‘Like her! I never saw any one half so beautiful. She looks such a lady. She is so dainty, and so soft, and so nice. Could I ever grow like that? Ah! auntie, you shake your head—I don’t mean so pretty, only a little more like her, a little less like a–’

‘My dear child!’ said the gratified mother, giving Kate a hug, though it was out of doors. And at that moment, Ombra, who had been in advance, turned round, and saw the hasty embrace, and shrugged her pretty shoulders, as her habit was.

‘Mamma, I wish very much you would keep these bursts of affection till you get home,’ said Ombra. ‘The Eldridges are coming down the cliff.’

‘Oh! who are the Eldridges? I know some people called Eldridge,’ said Kate—‘at least, I don’t know them, but I have heard–’

‘Hush! they will hear, too, if you don’t mind,’ said Ombra. And Kate was silent. She was changing rapidly, even in these few days. Ombra, who snubbed her, who was not gracious to her, who gave her no caresses, had, without knowing it, attained unbounded empire over her cousin. Kate had fallen in love with her, as girls so often do with one older than themselves. The difference in this case was scarcely enough to justify the sudden passion; but Ombra looked older than she was, and was so very different a being from Kate, that her gravity took the effect of years. Already this entirely unconscious influence had done more for Kate than all the educational processes she had gone through. It woke the woman, the gentlewoman, in the child, who had done, in her brief day, so many troublesome things. Ombra suddenly had taken the ideal place in her mind—she had been elevated, all unwitting of the honour, to the shrine in Kate’s heart. Everything in her seemed perfection to the girl—even her name, her little semi-reproofs, her gentle coldness. ‘If I could but be like Ombra, not blurting things out, not saying more than I mean, not carried away by everything that interests me,’ she said, self-reproachfully, with rising compunction and shame for all her past crimes. She had never seen the enormity of them as she did now. She set up Ombra, and worshipped her in every particular, with the enthusiasm of a fanatic. She tried to curb her once bounding steps into some resemblance to the other’s languid pace; and drove herself and Maryanne frantic by vain endeavours to smoothe her rich crisp chestnut hair into the similitude of Ombra’s shadowy, dusky locks. This sudden worship was independent of all reason. Mrs. Anderson herself was utterly taken by surprise by it, and Ombra had not as yet a suspicion of the fact; but it had already begun to work upon Kate.

It was not in her, however, to make the acquaintance of this group of new people without a little stir in her pulses—all the more as Mrs. Eldridge came up to herself with special cordiality.

‘I am sure this is Miss Courtenay,’ she said. ‘I have heard of you from my nephew and nieces at Langton-Courtenay. They told me you were coming to the Island. I hope you will like it, and think it as pretty as I do. You are most welcome, I am sure, to Shanklin.’

‘Are you their aunt at Langton-Courtenay?’ said Kate, with eyes which grew round with excitement and pleasure. ‘Oh! how very odd! I did not think anybody knew me here.’

‘I am aunt to the boys and girls,’ said Mrs. Eldridge. ‘Mrs. Hardwick is my husband’s sister. We must be like old friends, for the Hardwicks’ sake.’

‘But the Hardwicks are not old friends to me,’ said Kate, with a child’s unnecessary conscientiousness of explanation. ‘Bertie I know, but I have only seen the others twice.’

‘Oh! that does not matter,’ said the Rector’s wife; ‘you must come and see me all the same.’ And then she turned to Mrs. Anderson, and began to talk of the parish. Kate stood by and listened with wondering eyes as they discussed the poor folk, and their ways and their doings. They did not interfere in her way; but perhaps their way was not much better, on the whole, than Kate’s. She had been very interfering, there was no doubt; but then she had interfered with everybody, rich and poor alike, and made no invidious distinction. She stood and listened wondering, while the Rector added his contribution about the mothers’ meetings, and the undue expectations entertained by the old women at the almshouses. ‘We must guard against any foolish partiality, or making pets of them,’ Mr. Eldridge said; and his wife added that Mr. Aston, in the next parish, had quite *spoiled* his poor people. ‘He is a bachelor; he has nobody to keep him straight, and he believes all their stories. They know they have only to send to the Vicarage to get whatever they require. When one of them comes into our parish, we don’t know what to do with her,’ she said, shaking her head. Kate was too much occupied in listening to all this to perceive that Ombra shrugged her shoulders. Her interest in the new people kept her silent, as they reascended the cliff, and strolled towards the cottage; and it was not till the Rector and his wife had turned homewards, once more cordially shaking hands with her, and renewing their invitation, that she found her voice.

‘Oh! auntie, how very strange—how funny!’ she said. ‘To think I should meet the Eldridges here!’

‘Why not the Eldridges?—have you any objection to them?’ said Mrs. Anderson.

‘Oh, no!—I suppose not.’ (Kate put aside with an effort that audacity of Sir Herbert Eldridge, and false assumption about the size of his park.) ‘But it is so curious to meet directly, as soon as I arrive, people whom I have heard of–’

‘Indeed, my dear Kate, it is not at all wonderful,’ said her aunt, didactically. ‘The world is not nearly such a big place as you suppose. If you should ever travel as much as we have done (which heaven forbid!), you would find that you were always meeting people you knew, in the most unlikely places. Once, at Smyrna, when Mr. Anderson was there, a gentleman came on business, quite by chance, who was the son of one of my most intimate friends in my youth. Another time I met a companion of my childhood, whom I had lost sight of since we were at school, going up Vesuvius. Our chaplain at Cadiz turned out to be a distant connection of my husband’s, though we knew nothing of him before. Such things are always happening. The world looks very big, and you feel as if you must lose yourself in it; but, on the contrary, wherever one goes, one falls upon people one knows.’

‘But yet it is so strange about the Hardwicks,’ said Kate, persisting; ‘they are the only people I ever went to see—whom I was allowed to know.’

‘How very pleasant!’ said Mrs. Anderson. ‘Now I shall be quite easy in my mind. Your uncle must have approved of them, in that case, so I may allow you to associate with the Eldridges freely. How very nice, my love, that it should be so!’

Kate made no reply to this speech. She was not, to tell the truth, quite clear that her uncle approved. He had not cared to hear about Bertie Hardwick; he had frowned at the mention of him. ‘And Bertie is the nicest—he is the only one I care for,’ said Kate to herself; but she said nothing audibly on the subject. To her, notwithstanding her aunt’s philosophy, it seemed very strange indeed that Bertie Hardwick’s relatives should be the first to meet her in this new world.

CHAPTER XIV

Kate settled down into her new life with an ease and facility which nobody had expected. She wrote to her uncle that she was perfectly happy; that she never could be sufficiently thankful to him for freeing her from the yoke of Miss Blank, and placing her among people who were fond of her. 'Little fool!' Mr. Courtenay muttered to himself. 'They have flattered her, I suppose.' This was the easiest and most natural explanation to one who knew, or thought he knew, human nature so well.

But Kate was not flattered, except by her aunt's caressing ways and habitual fondness. Nobody in the Cottage recognised her importance as the heiress of Langton-Courtenay. Here she was no longer first, but second—nay third, taking her place after her cousin, as nature ordained. 'Ombra and Kate,' was the new form of her existence—first Ombra, then the new-comer, the youngest of all. She was spoiled as a younger child is spoiled, not in any other way. Mrs. Anderson's theory in education was indulgence. She did not believe in repression. She was always caressing, always yielding. For one thing, it was less troublesome than a continual struggle; but that was not her motive. She took high ground. 'What we have got to do is to ripen their young minds,' she said to the Rector's wife, who objected to her as 'much too good,' a reproach which Mrs. Anderson liked; 'and it is sunshine that ripens, not an east wind!' This was almost the only imaginative speech she had ever made in her life, and consequently she liked to repeat it. 'Depend upon it, it is sunshine that ripens them, and not east wind!'

'The sunshine ripens the wheat and the tares alike, as we are told in Scripture,' said Mrs. Eldridge, with professional seriousness.

'That shows that Providence is of my way of thinking,' said her antagonist. 'Why should one cross one's children, and worry them? They will have enough of that in their lives! Besides, I have practical proof on my side. Look, at Ombra! There is a child that never was crossed since she was born; and if I had scolded till I made myself ill, do you think I could have improved upon *that*?'

Mrs. Eldridge stood still for a moment, not believing her ears. She had daughters of her own, and to have Ombra set up as a model of excellence! But she recovered herself speedily, and gave vent to her feelings in a more courteous way.

'Ah! it is easy to see you never had any boys,' she said, with that sense of superiority which the mother of both sections of humanity feels over her who has produced but one. 'Ombra, indeed!' Mrs. Eldridge said, within herself. And, indeed, it was a want of 'proper feeling,' on Mrs. Anderson's part, to set up so manifestly her own daughter above other people's. She felt it, and immediately did what she could to atone.

'Boys, of course, are different,' she said; 'but I am sure you will agree with me that a poor child who has never had any one to love her, who has been brought up among servants, a girl who is motherless–'

'Oh! poor child! I can only say you are too good—too good! With such a troublesome disposition, too. I never could be half as good!' cried the Rector's wife.

Thus Mrs. Anderson triumphed in the argument. And as it happened that ripening under the sunshine was just what Kate wanted, the system answered in the most perfect way, especially as a gently chilling breeze, a kind of moral east wind, extremely subdued, but sufficiently keen, came from Ombra, checking Kate's irregularities, without seeming to do so, and keeping her high spirit down. Ombra's influence over her cousin increased as time went on. She was Kate's model of all that was beautiful and sweet. The girl subdued herself with all her might, and clipped and snipped at her own character, to bring it to the same mould as that of her cousin. And as such worship cannot go long unnoted, Ombra gradually grew aware of it, and softened under its influence. The Cottage grew very harmonious and pleasant within doors. When Kate went to bed, the mother and daughter would still linger and have little conversations about her, conversations in which the one still defended and

the other attacked—or made a semblance of attacking—the new-comer; but the acrid tone had gone out of Ombra's remarks.

'I don't want to say a word against Kate,' she would say, keeping up her old *rôle*. 'I think there is a great deal of good about her; but you know we have no longer our house to ourselves.'

'Could we enjoy our house to ourselves, Ombra, knowing that poor child to have no home?' said Mrs. Anderson, with feeling.

'Well, mamma, the poor child has a great many advantages over us,' said Ombra, hesitating. 'I should like to have had her on a visit; but to be always between you and me–'

'No one can be between you and me, my child.'

'That is true, perhaps. But then our little house, our quiet life all to ourselves.'

'That was a dream, my dear—that was a mere dream of your own. People in our position cannot have a life all to ourselves. We have our duties to society; and I have my duty to you, Ombra. Do you think I could be so selfish as to keep you altogether to myself, and never let you see the world, or have your chance of choosing some one who will take care of you better than I can?'

'Please don't,' said Ombra. 'I am quite content with you; and there is not much at Shanklin that can be called society or the world.'

'The world is everywhere,' said Mrs. Anderson, with dignity. 'I am not one of those who confine the term to a certain class. Your papa was but a Consul, but I have seen many an ambassador who was very inferior to him. Shanklin is a very nice place, Ombra; and the society, what there is, is very nice also. I like my neighbours very much—they are not lords and ladies, but they are well-bred, and some of them are well-born.'

'I don't suppose we are among that number,' said Ombra, with a momentary laugh. This was one of her pet perversities, said out of sheer opposition; for though she thrust the fact forward, she did not like it herself.

'I think you are mistaken,' said her mother, with a flush upon her face. 'Your papa had very good connections in Scotland; and my father's family, though it was not equal to the Courtenays, which my sister married into, was one of the most respectable in the county. You are not like Kate —you have not the pedigree which belongs to a house which has landed property; but you need not look down upon your forefathers for all that.'

'I do not look down upon them. I only wish not to stand up upon them, mamma, for they are not strong enough to bear me, I fear,' Ombra said, with a little forced laugh.

'I don't like joking on such subjects,' said Mrs. Anderson. 'But to return to Kate. She admires you very, very much, my darling—I don't wonder at that–'

'Silly child!' said Ombra, in a much softened tone.

'It shows her sense, I think; but it throws all the greater a responsibility on you. Oh! my dear love, could you and I, who are so happy together, dare to shut our hearts against that poor desolate child?'

Once more Ombra slightly, very slightly shrugged her shoulders; but she answered—

'I am sure I have no wish to shut my heart against her, mamma.'

'For my part,' said Mrs. Anderson, 'I feel I cannot pet her too much, or be too indulgent to her, to make up to her for fifteen years spent among strangers, with nobody to love.'

'How odd that she should have found nobody to love!' said Ombra, turning away. She herself was, as she believed, 'not demonstrative,' not 'effusive.' She was one of the many persons who think that people who do not express any feeling at all, must necessarily have more real feeling than those who disclose it—a curious idea, quite frequent in the world; and she rather prided herself upon her own reserve. Yet, reserved as she was, she, Ombra, had always found people to love her, and why not Kate? This was the thought that passed through her mind as she gave up the subject; but still she had grown reconciled to her cousin, had begun to like her, and to be gratified by her eager, girlish homage. Kate's admiration spoke in every look and word, in her abject submission to Ombra's opinion, her concurrence in all that Ombra said, her imitation of everything she did. Ombra was a good musician,

and Kate, who had no great faculty that way, got up and practised every morning, waking the early echoes, and getting anything but blessings from her idol, whose bed was exactly above the piano on the next floor. Ombra was a great linguist, by dint of her many travels, and Kate sent unlimited orders for dictionaries and grammars to her uncle, and began to learn verbs with enthusiasm. She had all the masters who came from London to Miss Story's quiet establishment, men whose hours were golden, and whom nobody but an heiress could have entertained in such profusion; and she applied herself with the greatest diligence to such branches of study as were favoured by Ombra, putting her own private tastes aside for them with an enthusiasm only possible to first love. Perhaps Kate's enthusiasm was all the greater because of the slow and rather grudging approbation which her efforts to please elicited. Mrs. Anderson was always pleased, always ready to commend and admire; but Ombra was very difficult. She made little allowance for any weakness, and demanded absolute perfection, as mentors at the age of seventeen generally do; and Kate hung on her very breath. Thus she took instinctively the best way to please the only one in the house who had set up any resistance to her. Over the rest Kate had an easy victory. It was Ombra who, all unawares, and not by any virtue of hers, exercised the best control and influence possible over the head-strong, self-opinioned girl. She was head-strong enough herself, and very imperfect, but that did not affect her all-potent visionary sway.

And nothing could be more regular, nothing more quiet and monotonous, than the routine of life in the Cottage. The coming of the masters was the event in it; and that was a mild kind of event, causing little enthusiasm. They breakfasted, worked, walked, and dined, and then rose next morning to do the same thing over again. Notwithstanding Mrs. Anderson's talk about her duty to society, there were very few claims made upon her. She was not much called upon to fulfil these duties. Sometimes the ladies went out to the Rectory to tea; sometimes, indeed, Mrs. Anderson and Ombra dined there; but on these occasions Kate was left at home, as too young for such an intoxicating pleasure. 'And, besides, my darling, I promised your uncle,' Mrs. Anderson would say. But Kate was always of the party when it was tea. There were other neighbours who gave similar entertainments; and before a year had passed, Kate had tasted the bread and butter of all the houses in the parish which Mrs. Anderson thought worthy of her friendship. But only to tea; 'I made that condition with Mr. Courtenay, and I must hold by it, though my heart is broken to leave you behind. If you knew how trying it was, my dearest child!' she would say with melancholy tones, as she stepped out, with a shawl over her evening toilet; but these were very rare occurrences indeed. And Kate went to the teas, and was happy.

How happy she was! When she was tired of the drawing-room (as happened sometimes), she would rush away to an odd little room under the leads, which was Francesca's work-room and oratory, where the other maids were never permitted to enter, but which had been made free to Mees Katta. Francesca was not like English servants, holding jealously by one special *metier*. She was cook, and she was housekeeper, but, at the same time, she was Mrs. Anderson's private milliner, making her dresses; and the personal attendant of both mother and daughter. Even Jane, the housemaid, scorned her for this versatility; but Francesca took no notice of the scorn. She was not born to confine herself within such narrow limits as an English kitchen afforded her; and she took compensation for her unusual labours. She lectured Ombra, as we have seen; she interfered in a great many things which were not her business; she gave her advice freely to her mistress; she was one of the household, not less interested than the mistress herself. And when Kate arrived, Francesca added another branch of occupation to the others; or, rather, she revived an art which she had once exercised with great applause, but which had fallen into disuse since Ombra ceased to be a child. She became the minstrel, the improvisatore, the ancient chronicler, the muse of the new-comer. When Kate felt the afternoon growing languid she snatched up a piece of work, and flew up the stairs to Francesca's retreat. 'Tell me something,' she would say; and, sitting at the old woman's feet, would forget her work, and her dulness, and everything in heaven and earth, in the entrancement of a tale. These were not fairy-tales, but bits of those stories, more strange than fairy-tales, which still haunt the old houses of Italy.

Francesca's tales were without end. She would begin upon a family pedigree, and work her way up or down through a few generations, without missing a stitch in her work, or dropping a thread in her story. She filled Kate's head with counts and barons, and gloomy castles and great palaces. It was an amusement which combined the delight of gossip and the delight of novel-reading in one.

And thus Kate's life ran on, as noiseless, as simple as the growth of a lily or a rose, with nothing but sunshine all about, warming her, ripening her, as her new guardian said, bringing slowly on, day by day, the moment of blossoming, the time of the perfect flower.

CHAPTER XV

It was summer when Kate arrived at the Cottage, and it was not till the Easter after that any disturbing influences came into the quiet scene. Easter was so late that year that it was almost summer again. The rich slopes of the landslip were covered with starry primroses, and those violets which have their own blue-eyed beauty only to surround them, and want the sweetness of their rarer sisters. The landslip is a kind of fairyland at that enchanted moment. Everything is coming—the hawthorn, the wild roses, all the flowers of early summer, are, as it were, on tiptoe, waiting for the hour of their call; and the primroses have come, and are crowding everywhere, turning the darkest corners into gardens of delight. Then there is the sea, now matchless blue, now veiled with mists, framing in every headland and jutting cliff, without any margin of beach to break its full tone of colour; and above, the new-budded trees, the verdure that grows and opens every day, the specks of white houses everywhere, dotted all over the heights. Spring, which makes everything and every one gay, which brings even to the sorrowful a touch of that reaction of nature that makes pain sorer for the moment, yet marks the new springing of life—fancy what it was to the sixteen-year-old girl, now first emancipated, among people who loved her, never judged her harshly, nor fretted her life with uncalled-for opposition!

Kate felt as if the primroses were a crowd of playmates, suddenly come to her out of the bountiful heart of nature. She gathered baskets full every day, and yet they never decreased. She passed her mornings in delicious idleness making them into enormous bouquets, which gave the Cottage something of the same aspect as the slopes outside. She had a taste for this frivolous but delightful occupation. I am free to confess that to spend hours putting primroses and violets together, in the biggest flat dishes which the Cottage could produce, was an extremely frivolous occupation; most likely she would have been a great deal better employed in improving her mind, in learning verbs, or practising exercises, or doing something useful. But youth has a great deal of leisure, and this bright fresh girl, in the bright little hall of the Cottage, arranging her flowers in the spring sunshine, made a very pretty picture. She put the primroses in, with their natural leaves about them, with sweet bunches of blue violets to heighten the effect, touching them as if she loved them; and, as she did it, she sang as the birds do, running on with unconscious music, and sweetness, and gladness. It was Spring with her as with them. Nothing was as yet required of her but to bloom and grow, and make earth fairer. And she did this unawares and was as happy over her vast, simple bouquet, and took as much sweet thought how to arrange it, as if that had been the great aim of life. She was one with her flowers, and both together they belonged to Spring—the Spring of the year, the Spring of life, the sweet time which comes but once, and never lasts too long.

She was thus employed one morning when steps came through the garden, steps which she did not much heed. For one thing, she but half heard them, being occupied with her ‘work,’ as she called it, and her song, and having no fear that anything unwelcome would appear at that sunny, open door. No one could come who did not know everybody in the little house, who was not friendly, and smiling, and kind, whose hand would not be held out in pleasant familiarity. Here were no trespassers, no strangers. Therefore Kate heard the steps as though she heard them not, and did not even pause to ask herself who was coming. She was roused, but then only with the mildest expectation, when a shadow fell across her bit of sunshine. She looked up with her song still on her lip, and her hands full of flowers. She stopped singing. ‘Oh! Bertie!’ she cried, half to herself, and made an eager step forward. But then suddenly she paused—she dropped her flowers. Curiosity, wonder, amazement came over her face. She went on slowly to the door, gazing, and questioning with her eyes.

‘Are there two of you?’ she said gravely. ‘I heard that Bertie Hardwick was coming. Oh! which is you? Stop—don’t tell me. I am not going to be mystified. I can find it out for myself.’

There were two young men standing in the hall, who laughed and blushed as they stood submitting to her inspection; but Kate was perfectly serious. She stood and looked at them with an unmoved and somewhat anxious countenance. A certain symbolical gravity and earnestness was in her face; but there was indeed occasion to hesitate. The two who stood before her seemed at the first glance identical. They had the same eyes, the same curling brown hair, the same features, the same figure. Gradually, however, the uncertainty cleared away from Kate's face.

'It must be you,' she said, still very seriously. 'You are not quite so tall, and I think I remember your eyes. You must be Bertie, I am sure.'

'We are both Bertie,' said the young man, laughing.

'Ah! but you must be *my* Bertie; I am certain of it,' said Kate. Not a gleam of maiden consciousness was in her; she said it with all simplicity and seriousness. She did not understand the colour that came to one Bertie's face or the smile that flashed over the other; and she held out her hand to the one whom she had selected. 'I am so glad to see you. Come in, and tell me all about Langton. Dear old Langton! Though you were so disagreeable about the size of the park–'

'I will never be disagreeable again.'

'Oh, nonsense!' cried Kate, interrupting him. 'As if one could stop being anything that is natural! My aunt is somewhere about, and Ombra is in the drawing-room. Come in. Perhaps, though, you had better tell me who this—other gentleman– Why, Mr. Bertie, I am not quite sure, after all, which is the other and which is you!'

'This is my cousin, Bertie Eldridge,' said her old friend. 'You will soon know the difference. You remember what an exemplary character I am, and he is quite the reverse. I am always getting into trouble on his account.'

'Miss Courtenay will soon know better than to believe you,' said the other; at which Kate started and clapped her hands.

'Oh! I know now that is not your voice. Ombra, please, here are two gentlemen–'

This is how the two cousins were introduced into the Cottage. They had been there before separately; but neither Mrs. Anderson nor her daughter knew how slight was the acquaintance which entitled Kate to qualify one of the new-comers as 'my Bertie.' They were both young, not much over twenty, and their likeness was wonderful; it was, however, a likeness which diminished as they talked, for their expression was as different as their voices. Kate had no hesitation in appropriating the one she knew.

'Tell me about Langton,' she said—'all about it. I have heard nothing for nearly a year. Oh! don't laugh. I know the house stands just where it used to stand, and no one dares to cut down the trees. But itself– Don't you know what Langton means to me?'

'Home?' said Bertie Hardwick, but with a little doubt in his tone.

'Home!' repeated Kate; and then she, too, paused perplexed. 'Not exactly home, for there is no one there I care for—much. Oh! but can't you understand? It is not home; I am much happier here; but, in a kind of a way, it is me!'

Bertie Hardwick was puzzled, and he was dazzled too. His first meeting with her had made no small impression upon him; and now Kate was almost a full-grown woman, and the brightness about her dazzled his eyes.

'It cannot be you now,' he said. 'It is—let.'

Kate gave a fierce little cry, and clenched her hands.

'Oh! Uncle Courtenay, I wish I could just kill you!' she said, half to herself.

'It is let, for four or five years, to the only kind of people who can afford to have great houses now—to Mr. Donkin, who has a large—shop in town.'

Kate moaned again, but then recovered herself.

'I don't see that it matters much about the shop. I think if I were obliged to work, I should not mind keeping a shop. It would be such fun! But, oh! if Uncle Courtenay were only here!'

'It is better not. There might be bloodshed, and you would regret it after,' said Bertie, gravely.

'Don't laugh at me; I mean it. And, if you won't tell me anything about Langton, tell me about yourself. Who is *he*? What does he mean by being so like you? He is different when he talks; but at the first glance– Why do you allow any one to be so like you, Mr. Bertie? If he is not nice, as you said–'

'I did not mean you to believe me,' said Bertie. 'He is the best fellow going. I wish I were half as good, or half as clever. He is my cousin, and just like my brother. Why, I am proud of being like him. We are taken for each other every day.'

'*I* should not like it,' said Kate. 'Ombra and I are not like each other, though we are cousins too. Do you know Ombra? I think there never was any one like her; but, on the whole, I think it is best to be two people, not one. Are you still at Oxford?—and is he at Oxford? Mr. Bertie, if I were you, I don't think I should be a clergyman.'

'Why?' said Bertie, who, unfortunately for himself, was much of her mind.

'You might not get a living, you know,' said Kate.

This she said conscientiously, to prepare him for the fact that he was not to have Langton-Courtenay; but his laugh disconcerted her, and immediately brought before her eyes the other idea that his objectionable uncle, who had a park larger than Langton, might have a living too. She coloured high, having begun to find out, by means of her education in the Cottage, when she had committed herself.

'Or,' she went on, with all the calmness she could command, 'when you had a living you might not like it. The Rector here– Oh! of course he must be your uncle too. He is very good, I am sure, and very nice,' said Kate, floundering, and feeling that she was getting deeper and deeper into the mire; 'but it is so strange to hear him talk. The old women in the almshouses, and the poor people, and all that, and mothers' meetings– Of course, it must be very right and very good; but, Mr. Bertie, nothing but mothers' meetings, and old women in almshouses, for all your life–'

'I suppose he has something more than that,' said Bertie, half affronted, half amused.

'I suppose so—or, at least, I hope so,' said Kate. 'Do you know what a mothers' meeting is? But to go to Oxford, you know, for that–! If I were you, I would be something else. There must be a great many other things that you could be. Soldiers are not much good in time of peace, and lawyers have to tell so many lies—or, at least, so people say in books. I will tell you what I should advise, Mr. Bertie. Doctors are of real use in the world—I would be a doctor, if I were you.'

'But I should not at all like to be a doctor,' said Bertie. 'Of all trades in the world, that is the last I should choose. Talk of mothers' meetings! a doctor is at every fool's command, to run here and there; and besides– I think, Miss Courtenay, you have made a mistake.'

'I am only saying what I would do if it was me,' said Kate, softly folding her hands. 'I would rather be a doctor than any of the other things. And you ought to decide, Mr. Bertie; you will not be a boy much longer. You have got something here,' and she put up her hand to her own soft chin, and stroked it gently, 'which you did not have the last time I saw you. You are almost—a man.'

This for Bertie to hear, who was one-and-twenty, and an Oxford man—who had felt himself full grown, both in frame and intellect, for these two years past! He was wroth—his cheek burned, and his eye flashed. But, fortunately, Mrs. Anderson interposed, and drew her chair towards them, putting an end to the *tête-à-tête*. Mrs. Anderson was somewhat disturbed, for her part. Here were two young men—two birds of prey—intruding upon the stillness which surrounded the nest in which she had hidden an heiress. What was she to do? Was it safe to permit them to come, fluttering, perhaps, the nestling? or did stern duty demand of her to close her doors, and shut out every chance of evil? As soon as she perceived that the conversation between Kate and her Bertie was special and private, she trembled and interposed. She asked the young man all about his family, his sisters, his studies—anything she could think of—and so kept her heiress, as she imagined, safe, and the wild beast at bay.

'You are sure your uncle approved of the Hardwicks as friends for you, Kate?' she said that evening, when the visit had been talked over in full family conclave. Mrs. Anderson might make what

pretence she pleased that they were only ordinary visitors, but the two Berties had made a commotion much greater than the Rector and his wife did, or even the schoolboy and schoolgirl Eldridges, noisy and tumultuous as their visits often were.

‘He made me go to the Rectory with him,’ said Kate, very demurely. ‘It was not my doing at all; he wanted me to go.’

And, after that, what could there be to say?

CHAPTER XVI

The two Berties came again next day—they came with their cousins, and they came without them. They joined the party from the Cottage in their walks, with an intuitive knowledge where they were going, which was quite extraordinary. They got up croquet-parties and picnics; they were always in attendance upon the two girls. Mrs. Anderson had many a thought on the subject, and wondered much what her duty was in such a very trying emergency; but there were two things that consoled her —the first that it was Ombra who was the chief object of the two young men's admiration; and the second that they could not possibly stay long. Ombra was their first object. She assured herself of this with a warm and pleasant glow at her heart, though she was not a match-making mother, nor at all desirous of 'marrying off,' and 'getting rid of' her only child. Besides, the young men were too young for anything serious—not very long out of their teens; lads still under strict parental observation and guidance; they were too young to make matrimonial proposals to any one, or to carry such proposals out. But, nevertheless, it was pleasant to Mrs. Anderson to feel that Ombra was their first object, and that her 'bairn' was 'respected like the lave.' 'Thank Heaven, Kate's money has nothing to do with it,' she said to herself; and where was the use of sending away two handsome young men, whom the girls liked, and who were a change to them? Besides, they were going away so soon—in a fortnight —no harm could possibly come.

So Mrs. Anderson tolerated them, invited them, gave them luncheon sometimes, and often tea, till they became as familiar about the house as the young Eldridges were, or any other near neighbours. And the girls did not have their heads at all turned by the new cavaliers, who were so assiduous in their attentions. Ombra gently ridiculed them both, hitting them with dainty little arrows of scorn, smiling at their boyish ways, their impetuosity and self-opinion. Kate, on the contrary, took them up very gravely, with a motherly, not to say grandmotherly interest in their future, giving to him whom she called her old friend the very best of good advice. Mrs. Anderson herself was much amused by this new development of her charge's powers. She said to herself, a dozen times in a day, how ridiculous it was to suppose that boys and girls could not be in each other's company without falling in love. Why, here were two pairs continually in each other's company, and without the faintest shadow of any such folly to disturb them! Perhaps a sense that it was to her own perfect good management that this was owing, increased her satisfaction. She 'kept her eye on them,' never officiously, never demonstratively, but in the most vigilant way; and a certain gentle complacency mingled with her content. Had she left them to roam about as they pleased without her, then indeed trouble might have been looked for; but Mrs. Anderson was heroic, and put aside her own ease, and was their companion everywhere. At the same time (but this was done with the utmost caution) she took a little pains to find out all about Sir Herbert Eldridge, the father of one of the Berties—his county, and the amount of his property, and all the information that was possible. She breathed not a word of this to any one—not even to Ombra; but she put Bertie Eldridge on her daughter's side of the table at tea; and perhaps showed him a little preference, for her own part, a preference, however, so slight, so undiscernible to the vulgar eye, that neither of the young men found it out. She was very good to them, quite irrespective of their family, or the difference in their prospects; and she missed them much when they went away. For go away they did, at the end of their fortnight, leaving the girls rather dull, and somewhat satirical. It was the first invasion of the kind that had been made into their life. The boys at the Rectory were still nothing but boys; and men did not abound in the neighbourhood. Even Ombra was slightly misanthropical when the Berties went away.

'What it is to be a boy!' she said; 'they go where they like, these two, and arrange their lives as they please. What a fuss everybody makes about them; and yet they are commonplace enough. If they were girls like us, how little any one would care–'

'My dear, Mr. Eldridge will be a great landed proprietor, and have a great deal in his power,' said Mrs. Anderson.

'Because he happens to have been born Sir Herbert's son; no thanks to *him*,' said Ombra, with disdain. 'And most likely, when he is a great landed proprietor he will do nothing worth noticing. The other is more interesting to me; he at least has his own way to make.'

'I wonder what poor Bertie will do?' said Kate, with her grandmother air. 'I should not like to see him a clergyman. What Ombra says is very true, auntie. When one is a great Squire, you know, one can't help one's self; one's life is all settled before one is born. But when one can choose what to be!– For my part,' said Kate, with great gravity, 'I am anxious about Bertie, too. I gave him all the advice I could—but I am not sure that he is the sort of boy to take advice.'

'He is older than you are, my love, and perhaps he may think he knows better,' said Mrs. Anderson with a smile.

'But that would be a mistake,' said Kate. 'Boys have so many things to do, they have no time to think. And then they don't consider things as we do; and besides–' But here Kate paused, doubting the wisdom of further explanations. What she had meant to say was that, having no thinking to do for herself, her own position being settled and established beyond the reach of fate, she had the more time to give to the concerns of her neighbours. But it occurred to her that Ombra had scorned Bertie Eldridge's position, and might scorn hers also, and she held her peace.

'Besides, there is always a fuss made about them, as if they were better than other people. Don't let us talk of them any more; I am sick of the subject,' said Ombra, withdrawing into a book. The others made no objection; they acquiesced with a calmness which perhaps scarcely satisfied Ombra. Mrs. Anderson declared openly that she missed the visitors much; and Kate avowed, without hesitation, that the boys were fun, and she was sorry that they were gone. But the chances are that it was Ombra who missed them most, though she professed to be rather glad than otherwise. 'They were a nuisance, interrupting one whatever one was doing. Boys at that age always are a nuisance,' she said, with an air of severity, and she returned to all her occupations with an immense deal of seriousness.

But this disturbance of their quiet affected her in reality much more than it affected her companions—the very earnestnest of her resumed duties testified to this. She was on the edge of personal life, wondering and already longing to taste its excitements and troubles; and everything that disturbed the peaceful routine felt like that life which was surely coming, and stirred her pulses. It was like the first creeping up of the tide about the boat which is destined to live upon the waves; not enough yet to float the little vessel off from the stays which hold it, but enough to rock and stir it with prophetic sensation of the fuller flood to come.

Ombra was 'viewy,' to use a word which has become well-nigh obsolete. She was full of opinions and speculations, which she called thought; a little temper, a good deal of unconscious egotism, and a reflective disposition, united to make her what is called, a 'thoughtful girl.' She mused upon herself, and upon the few varieties of human life she knew, and upon the world, and all its accidents and misunderstandings, as she had seen them, and upon the subjects which she read about. But partly her youth, and partly her character, made her thoughts like the observations of a traveller newly entered into a strange country, and feeling himself capable, as superficial travellers often are, to lay bare its character, and fathom all its problems at a glance. Other people were, to this young philosopher, as foreigners are to the inexperienced traveller. She was very curious about them, and marked their external peculiarities with sufficient quickness; but she had not imagination enough to feel for them or with them, or to see their life from their own point of view. Her own standing-point was the only one in the world to her. She could judge others only by herself.

Curiously enough, however, with this want of sympathetic imagination there was combined a good deal of fancy. Ombra had written little stories from her earliest youth. She had a literary turn. At this period of her life, when she was nearly eighteen, and the world was full of wonders and delightful mysteries to her, she wrote a great deal, sometimes in verse, sometimes in prose, and now

and then asked herself whether it was not genius which inspired her. Some of her poems, as she called them, had been printed in little religious magazines and newspapers—for Ombra's muse was as yet highly religious. She had every reason to believe herself one of the stars that shine unseen—a creature superior to the ordinary run of humanity. She read more than any one she knew, and thought, or believed that she thought, deeply on a great many subjects. And one of these subjects naturally was that of the position of women. She was girl enough, and had enough of nature in her, to enjoy the momentary brightness of the firmament which the two Berties had brought. She liked the movement and commotion as much as the others did—the walks, the little parties, the expeditions, and even the games; and she felt the absence of these little excitements when they came to an end. And thereupon she set herself to reflect upon them. She carried her little portfolio up to a rustic seat which had been made on the cliff, sheltered by some ledges of rock, and covered with flowers and bushes, and set herself to think. And here her thoughts took that turn which is so natural, yet so hackneyed and conventional. No one would, in reality, have been less disposed than Ombra to give up a woman's—a lady's privileges. To go forth into the world unattended, without the shield and guard of honour, which her semi-foreign education made doubly necessary to her, would have seemed to the girl the utmost misery of desolation. She would have resented the need as a wrong done her by fate. But nevertheless she sat up in her rocky bower, and looked over the blue sea, and the white headlands, and said to herself, bitterly, what a different lot had fallen to these two Berties from that which was her own. They could go where they liked, society imposed no restraints upon them; when they were tired of one place, they could pass on to another. Heaven and earth was moved for their education, to make everything known to them, to rifle all the old treasure-houses, to communicate to them every discovery which human wisdom had ever made. And for what slight creatures were all these pains taken; boys upon whom she looked down in the fuller development of her womanhood, feeling them ever so much younger than she was, less serious in their ideas, less able to do anything worth living for! It seemed to Ombra, at that moment, that there was in herself a power such as none of 'these boys' had a conception of—genius, the divinest thing in humanity! But that which would have been fostered and cultivated in them, would be quenched, or at least hampered and kept down in her. 'For I am only a woman!' said Ombra, with a swelling heart.

All this was perfectly natural; and, at the same time, it was quite conventional. It was a little overflow of that depression after a feast, that reaction of excitement, which makes every human creature blaspheme in one way or other. The sound of Kate's voice, singing as she came up the little path to the cliff, made her cousin angry, in this state of her mind and nerves. Here was a girl no better than the boys, a creature without thought, who neither desired a high destiny, nor could understand what it meant.

'How careless you are, Kate!' she cried, in the impulse of the moment. 'Always singing, or some nonsense—and you know you can't sing! If I were as young as you are, I would not lose my time as you do! Do you never think?'

'Yes,' said Kate, with a meekness she never showed but to Ombra, 'a great deal sometimes. But I can't on such a morning. There seems nothing in all the world but sunshine and primroses, and the air is so sweet! Come up to the top of the cliff, and try how far you can see. I think I can make out that big ship that kept firing so the other day. Ombra, if you don't mind, I shall be first at the top!'

'As if I cared who was first at the top! Oh! Kate, Kate, you are as frivolous as—as—the silly creatures in novels—or as these boys themselves!'

'The boys were very good boys!' said Kate. 'If they are silly, they can't help it. Of course they were not as clever as you—no one is; and Bertie, you know—little Bertie, my Bertie—ought to think more of what he is going to do. But they were very nice, as boys go. We can't expect them to be like *us*. Ombra, do come and try a run for the top.'

'What a foolish child you are!' said Ombra, suffering her portfolio to be taken out of her hands; and then her youth vindicated itself, and she started off like a young fawn up the little path. Kate

could have won the race had she tried, but was too loyal to outstrip her princess. And thus the cobwebs were blown away from the young thinker's brain.

CHAPTER XVII

It will be seen, however, that, though Kate's interpretation of the imperfections of 'the boys' was more genial than that of Ombra, yet that still there was a certain condescension in her remarks, and sense that she herself was older, graver, and of much more serious stuff altogether than the late visitors. Her instinct for interference, which had been in abeyance since she came to the Cottage, sprung up into full force the moment these inferior creatures came within her reach. She felt that it was her natural mission, the work for which she was qualified, to set and keep them right. This she had been quite unable to feel herself entitled to do in the Cottage. Mrs. Anderson's indulgence and tenderness, and Ombra's superiority, had silenced even her lively spirit. She could not tender her advice to them, much as she might have desired to do so. But Bertie Hardwick was a bit of Langton, one of her own people, a natural-born subject, for whose advantage all her powers were called forth. She thought a great deal about his future, and did not hesitate to say so. She spoke of it to Mr. Eldridge, electrifying the excellent Rector.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.