Trollope Anthony

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Содержание

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Vol. I

CHAPTER I.
THE RAY FAMILY

There are women who cannot grow alone as standard trees; – for whom the support and warmth of some wall, some paling, some post, is absolutely necessary; – who, in their growth, will bend and incline themselves towards some such prop for their life, creeping with their tendrils along the ground till they reach it when the circumstances of life have brought no such prop within their natural and immediate reach. Of most women it may be said that it would be well for them that they should marry, – as indeed of most men also, seeing that man and wife will each lend the other strength, and yet in lending lose none; but to the women of whom I now speak some kind of marriage is quite indispensable, and by them some kind of marriage is always made, though the union is often unnatural. A woman in want of a wall against which to nail herself will swear conjugal obedience sometimes to

her cook, sometimes to her grandchild, sometimes to her lawyer. Any standing corner, post, or stump, strong enough to bear her weight will suffice; but to some standing corner, post, or stump, she will find her way and attach herself, and there will she be married.

Such a woman was our Mrs. Ray. As her name imports, she had been married in the way most popular among ladies, with bell, book, and parson. She had been like a young peach tree that, in its early days, is carefully taught to grow against a propitious southern wall. Her natural prop had been found for her, and all had been well. But her heaven had been made black with storms; the heavy winds had come, and the warm sheltering covert against which she had felt herself so safe had been torn away from her branches as they were spreading themselves forth to the fulness of life. She had been married at eighteen, and then, after ten years of wedded security, she had become a widow.

Her husband had been some years older than herself, – a steady, sober, hardworking, earnest man, well fitted to act as a protecting screen to such a woman as he had chosen. They had lived in Exeter, both of them having belonged to Devonshire from their birth; and Mr. Ray, though not a clergyman himself, had been employed in matters ecclesiastical. He was a lawyer, – but a lawyer of that sort that is so nearly akin to the sacerdotal profession, as to make him quite clerical and almost a clergyman. He managed the property of the dean and chapter, and knew what were the rights, and also what were the wrongs, of prebendaries

and minor canons, – of vicars choral, and even of choristers. But he had been dead many years before our story commences, and so much as this is now said of him simply to explain under what circumstances Mrs. Ray had received the first tinge of that colouring which was given to her life by church matters.

They had been married somewhat over ten years when he died, and she was left with two surviving daughters, the eldest and the youngest of the children she had borne. The eldest, Dorothea, was then more than nine years old, and as she took much after her father, being stern, sober, and steady, Mrs. Ray immediately married herself to her eldest child. Dorothea became the prop against which she would henceforth grow. And against Dorothea she had grown ever since, with the exception of one short year. In that year Dorothea had taken a husband to herself and had lost him; – so that there were two widows in the same house. She, like her mother, had married early, having joined her lot to that of a young clergyman near Baslehurst; but he had lived but a few months, and Mrs. Ray's eldest child had come back to her mother's cottage, black, and stiff, and stern, in widow's weeds, – Mrs. Prime by name. Black, and stiff, and stern, in widow's weeds, she had remained since, for nine years following, and those nine years will bring us to the beginning of our story.

As regards Mrs. Ray herself, I think it was well that poor Mr. Prime had died. It assured to her the support which she needed. It must, however, be acknowledged that Mrs. Prime was a harder taskmaster than Dorothea Ray had been, and that the mother

might have undergone a gentler ruling had the daughter never become a wife. I think there was much in the hardness of the weeds she wore. It seemed as though Mrs. Prime in selecting her crape, her bombazine, and the models of her caps, had resolved to repress all ideas of feminine softness; – as though she had sworn to herself, with a great oath, that man should never again look on her with gratified eyes. The materials she wore have made other widows very pleasant to be seen, – with a sad thoughtful pleasantness indeed, but still very pleasant. There was nothing of that with Mrs. Prime. When she came back to her mother's cottage near Baslehurst she was not yet twenty years old, but she was rough with weeds. Her caps were lumpy, heavy, full of woe, and clean only as decency might require, – not nicely clean with feminine care. The very stuff of which they were made was brown, rather than white, and her dress was always the same. It was rough, and black, and clinging, – disagreeable to the eye in its shape, as will always be the dress of any woman which is worn day after day through all hours. By nature and education Mrs. Prime was a prim, tidy woman, but it seemed that her peculiar ideas of duty required her to militate against her nature and education, at any rate in appearance. And this was her lot in life before she had yet reached her twentieth year!

Dorothea Ray had not been wanting in some feminine attraction. She had ever been brown and homely, but her features had been well-formed, and her eyes had been bright. Now, as she approached to thirty years of age, she might have been as well-

looking as at any earlier period of her life if it had been her wish to possess good looks. But she had had no such wish. On the contrary, her desire had been to be ugly, forbidding, unattractive, almost repulsive; so that, in very truth, she might be known to be a widow indeed. And here I must not be misunderstood. There was nothing hypocritical about Mrs. Prime, nor did she make any attempt to appear before men to be weighted with a deeper sorrow than that which she truly bore; hypocrisy was by no means her fault. Her fault was this; that she had taught herself to believe that cheerfulness was a sin, and that the more she became morose, the nearer would she be to the fruition of those hopes of future happiness on which her heart was set. In all her words and thoughts she was genuine; but, then, in so very many of them she was mistaken! This was the wall against which Mrs. Ray had allowed herself to be fastened for many years past, and though the support was strong it must be admitted that it could hardly have been at all times pleasant.

Mrs. Ray had become a widow before she was thirty; and she had grieved for her husband with truest sorrow, pouring herself out at first in tears, and afterwards expending herself in long hours of vain regrets. But she had never been rough or hard in her widowhood. It had ever been her nature to be soft. She was a woman all over, and had about her so much of a woman's prettiness, that she had not altogether divested herself of it, even when her weepers had been of the broadest. To obtain favour in men's eyes had never been in her mind since she had first

obtained favour in the eyes of him who had been her lord; but yet she had never absolutely divested herself of her woman charms, of that look half retreating, half beseeching, which had won the heart of the ecclesiastical lawyer. Gradually her weeds and her deep heavy crapes had fallen away from her, and then, without much thought on the matter, she dressed herself much as did other women of forty or forty-five, – being driven, however, on certain occasions by her daughter to a degree of dinginess, not by any means rivalling that of the daughter herself, but which she would not have achieved had she been left to her own devices. She was a sweet-tempered, good-humoured, loving, timid woman, ever listening and believing and learning, with a certain aptitude for gentle mirth at her heart which, however, was always being repressed and controlled by the circumstances of her life. She could gossip over a cup of tea, and enjoy buttered toast and hot cake very thoroughly, if only there was no one near her to whisper into her ear that any such enjoyment was wicked. In spite of the sorrows she had suffered she would have taught herself to believe this world to be a pleasant place, were it not so often preached into her ears that it is a vale of tribulation in which no satisfaction can abide. And it may be said of Mrs. Ray that her religion, though it sufficed her, tormented her grievously. It sufficed her; and if on such a subject I may venture to give an opinion, I think it was of a nature to suffice her in that great strait for which it had been prepared. But in this world it tormented her, carrying her hither and thither, and leaving her in grievous

doubt, not as to its own truth in any of its details, but as to her own conduct under its injunctions, and also as to her own mode of believing in it. In truth she believed too much. She could never divide the minister from the Bible; – nay, the very clerk in the church was sacred to her while exercising his functions therein. It never occurred to her to question any word that was said to her. If a linen-draper were to tell her that one coloured calico was better for her than another, she would take that point as settled by the man's word, and for the time would be free from all doubt on that heading. So also when the clergyman in his sermon told her that she should live simply and altogether for heaven, that all thoughts as to this world were wicked thoughts, and that nothing belonging to this world could be other than painful, full of sorrow and vexations, she would go home believing him absolutely, and with tear-laden eyes would bethink herself how utterly she was a castaway, because of that tea, and cake, and innocent tittle tattle with which the hours of her Saturday evening had been beguiled. She would weakly resolve that she would laugh no more, and that she would live in truth in a valley of tears. But then as the bright sun came upon her, and the birds sang around her, and some one that she loved would cling to her and kiss her, she would be happy in her own despite, and would laugh with a low musical sweet tone, forgetting that such laughter was a sin.

And then that very clergyman himself would torment her; – he that told her from the pulpit on Sundays how frightfully vain were all attempts at worldly happiness. He would come to

her on the Monday with a good-natured, rather rubicund face, and would ask after all her little worldly belongings, – for he knew of her history and her means, – and he would joke with her, and tell her comfortably of his grown sons and daughters, who were prospering in worldly matters, and express the fondest solicitude as to their worldly advancement. Twice or thrice a year Mrs. Ray would go to the parsonage, and such evenings would be by no means hours of wailing. Tea and buttered toast on such occasions would be very manifestly in the ascendant. Mrs. Ray never questioned the propriety of her clergyman's life, nor taught herself to see a discrepancy between his doctrine and his conduct. But she believed in both, and was unconsciously troubled at having her belief so varied. She never thought about it, or discovered that her friend allowed himself to be carried away in his sermons by his zeal, and that he condemned this world in all things, hoping that he might thereby teach his hearers to condemn it in some things. Mrs. Ray would allow herself the privilege of no such argument as that. It was all gospel to her. The parson in the church, and the parson out of the church, were alike gospels to her sweet, white, credulous mind; but these differing gospels troubled her and tormented her.

Of that particular clergyman, I may as well here say that he was the Rev. Charles Comfort, and that he was rector of Cawston, a parish in Devonshire, about two miles out of Baslehurst. Mr. Prime had for a year or two been his curate, and during that term of curacy he had married Dorothea Ray. Then

he had died, and his widow had returned from the house her husband had occupied near the church to her mother's cottage. Mr. Prime had been possessed of some property, and when he died he left his widow in the uncontrolled possession of two hundred a year. As it was well known that Mrs. Ray's income was considerably less than this, the people of Baslehurst and Cawston had declared how comfortable for Mrs. Ray would be this accession of wealth to the family. But Mrs. Ray had not become much the richer. Mrs. Prime did no doubt pay her fair quota towards the maintenance of the humble cottage at Bragg's End, for such was the name of the spot at which Mrs. Ray lived. But she did not do more than this. She established a Dorcas society at Baslehurst, of which she became permanent president, and spent her money in carrying on this institution in the manner most pleasing to herself. I fear that Mrs. Prime liked to be more powerful at these charitable meetings than her sister labourers in the same vineyard, and that she achieved this power by the means of her money. I do not bring this as a heavy accusation against her. In such institutions there is generally need of a strong, stirring, leading mind. If some one would not assume power, the power needed would not be exercised. Such a one as Mrs. Prime is often necessary. But we all have our own pet temptations, and I think that Mrs. Prime's temptation was a love of power.

It will be understood that Baslehurst is a town, – a town with a market, and hotels, and a big brewery, and a square, and street; whereas Cawston is a village, or rather a rural parish, three miles

out of Baslehurst, north of it, lying on the river Avon. But Bragg's End, though within the parish of Cawston, lies about a mile and a half from the church and village, on the road to Baslehurst, and partakes therefore almost as much of the township of Baslehurst as it does of the rusticity of Cawston. How Bragg came to such an end, or why this corner of the parish came to be thus united for ever to Bragg's name, no one in the parish knew. The place consisted of a little green, and a little wooden bridge, over a little stream that trickled away into the Avon. Here were clustered half a dozen labourers' cottages, and a beer or cider shop. Standing back from the green was the house and homestead of Farmer Sturt, and close upon the green, with its garden hedge running down to the bridge, was the pretty cottage of Mrs. Ray. Mr. Comfort had known her husband, and he had found for her this quiet home. It was a pretty place, with one small sitting-room opening back upon the little garden, and with another somewhat larger fronting towards the road and the green. In the front room Mrs. Ray lived, looking out upon so much of the world as Bragg's End green afforded to her view. The other seemed to be kept with some faint expectation of company that never came. Many of the widow's neatest belongings were here preserved in most perfect order; but one may say that they were altogether thrown away, – unless indeed they afforded solace to their owner in the very act of dusting them. Here there were four or five books, prettily bound, with gilt leaves, arranged in shapes on the small round table. Here also was deposited a spangled mat of

wondrous brightness, made of short white sticks of glass strung together. It must have taken care and time in its manufacture, but was, I should say, but of little efficacy either for domestic use or domestic ornament. There were shells on the chimneypiece, and two or three china figures. There was a birdcage hung in the window but without a bird. It was all very clean, but the room conveyed at the first glance an overpowering idea of its own absolute inutility and vanity. It was capable of answering no purpose for which men and women use rooms; but he who could have said so to Mrs. Ray must have been a cruel and a hardhearted man.

The other room which looked out upon the green was snug enough, and sufficed for all the widow's wants. There was a little book-case laden with books. There was the family table at which they ate their meals; and there was the little table near the window at which Mrs. Ray worked. There was an old sofa, and an old arm-chair; and there was, also, a carpet, alas, so old that the poor woman had become painfully aware that she must soon have either no carpet or a new one. A word or two had already been said between her and Mrs. Prime on that matter, but the word or two had not as yet been comfortable. Then, over the fire, there was an old round mirror; and, having told of that, I believe I need not further describe the furniture of the sitting room at Bragg's End.

But I have not as yet described the whole of Mrs. Ray's family. Had I done so, her life would indeed have been sour,

and sorrowful, for she was a woman who especially needed companionship. Though I have hitherto spoken but of one daughter, I have said that two had been left with her when her husband died. She had one whom she feared and obeyed, seeing that a master was necessary to her; but she had another whom she loved and caressed, and I may declare, that some such object for her tenderness was as necessary to her as the master. She could not have lived without something to kiss, something to tend, something to which she might speak in short, loving, pet terms of affection. This youngest girl, Rachel, had been only two years old when her father died, and now, at the time of this story, was not yet quite twenty. Her sister was, in truth, only seven years her senior, but in all the facts and ways of life, she seemed to be the elder by at least half a century. Rachel indeed, at the time, felt herself to be much nearer of an age with her mother. With her mother she could laugh and talk, ay, and form little wicked whispered schemes behind the tyrant's back, during some of those Dorcas hours, in which Mrs. Prime would be employed at Baslehurst; schemes, however, for the final perpetration of which, the courage of the elder widow would too frequently be found insufficient.

Rachel Ray was a fair-haired, well-grown, comely girl, – very like her mother in all but this, that whereas about the mother's eyes there was always a look of weakness, there was a shadowing of coming strength of character round those of the daughter. On her brow there was written a capacity for sustained purpose

which was wanting to Mrs. Ray. Not that the reader is to suppose that she was masterful like her sister. She had been brought up under Mrs. Prime's directions, and had not, as yet, learned to rebel. Nor was she in any way prone to domineer. A little wickedness now and then, to the extent, perhaps, of a vain walk into Baslehurst on a summer evening, a little obstinacy in refusing to explain whither she had been and whom she had seen, a yawn in church, or a word of complaint as to the length of the second Sunday sermon, – these were her sins; and when rebuked for them by her sister, she would of late toss her head, and look slily across to her mother, with an eye that was not penitent. Then Mrs. Prime would become black and angry, and would foretell hard things for her sister, denouncing her as fashioning herself wilfully in the world's ways. On such occasions Mrs. Ray would become very unhappy, believing first in the one child and then in the other. She would defend Rachel, till her weak defence would be knocked to shivers, and her poor vacillating words taken from out of her mouth. Then, when forced to acknowledge that Rachel was in danger of backsliding, she would kiss her and cry over her, and beg her to listen to the sermons. Rachel hitherto had never rebelled. She had never declared that a walk into Baslehurst was better than a sermon. She had never said out boldly that she liked the world and its wickednesses. But an observer of physiognomy, had such observer been there, might have seen that the days of such rebellion were coming.

She was a fair-haired girl, with hair, not flaxen, but of light-

brown tint, – thick, and full, and glossy, so that its charms could not all be hidden away let Mrs. Prime do what she would to effect such hiding. She was well made, being tall and straight, with great appearance of health and strength. She walked as though the motion were pleasant to her, and easy, – as though the very act of walking were a pleasure. She was bright too, and clever in their little cottage, striving hard with her needle to make things look well, and not sparing her strength in giving household assistance. One little maiden Mrs. Ray employed, and a gardener came to her for half a day once a week; – but I doubt whether the maiden in the house, or the gardener out of the house, did as much hard work as Rachel. How she had toiled over that carpet, patching it and piecing it! Even Dorothea could not accuse her of idleness. Therefore Dorothea accused her of profitless industry, because she would not attend more frequently at those Dorcas meetings.

"But, Dolly, how on earth am I to make my own things, and look after mamma's? Charity begins at home." Then had Dorothea put down her huge Dorcas basket, and explained to her sister, at considerable length, her reading of that text of Scripture. "One's own clothes must be made all the same," Rachel said when the female preacher had finished. "And I don't suppose even you would like mamma to go to church without a decent gown." Then Dorothea had seized up her huge basket angrily, and had trudged off into Baslehurst at a quick pace, – at a pace much too quick when the summer's heat is considered; – and as she went, unhappy thoughts filled her mind. A coloured dress

belonging to Rachel herself had met her eye, and she had heard tidings of – a young man!

Such tidings, to her ears, were tidings of iniquity, of vanity, of terrible sin; they were tidings which hardly admitted of being discussed with decency, and which had to be spoken of below the breath. A young man! Could it be that such disgrace had fallen upon her sister! She had not as yet mentioned the subject to Rachel, but she had given a dark hint to their afflicted mother.

"No, I didn't see it myself, but I heard it from Miss Pucker."

"She that was to have been married to William Whitecoat, the baker's son, only he went away to Torquay and picked up with somebody else. People said he did it because she does squint so dreadfully."

"Mother!" – and Dorothea spoke very sternly as she answered – "what does it matter to us about William Whitecoat, or Miss Pucker's squint? She is a woman eager in doing good."

"It's only since he left Baslehurst, my dear."

"Mother! – does that matter to Rachel? Will that save her if she be in danger? I tell you that Miss Pucker saw her walking with that young man from the brewery!"

Though Mrs. Ray had been strongly inclined to throw what odium she could upon Miss Pucker, and though she hated Miss Pucker in her heart, – at this special moment, – for having carried tales against her darling, she could not deny, even to herself, that a terrible state of things had arrived if it were really true that Rachel had been seen walking with a young man. She was not

bitter on the subject as was Mrs. Prime and poor Miss Pucker, but she was filled full of indefinite horror with regard to young men in general. They were all regarded by her as wolves, – as wolves, either with or without sheep's clothing. I doubt whether she ever brought it home to herself that those whom she now recognized as the established and well-credited lords of the creation had ever been young men themselves. When she heard of a wedding, – when she learned that some struggling son of Adam had taken to himself a wife, and had settled himself down to the sober work of the world, she rejoiced greatly, thinking that the son of Adam had done well to get himself married. But whenever it was whispered into her ear that any young man was looking after a young woman, – that he was taking the only step by which he could hope to find a wife for himself, – she was instantly shocked at the wickedness of the world, and prayed inwardly that the girl at least might be saved like a brand from the burning. A young man, in her estimation, was a wicked wild beast, seeking after young women to devour them, as a cat seeks after mice. This at least was her established idea, – the idea on which she worked, unless some other idea on any special occasion were put into her head. When young Butler Cornbury, the eldest son of the neighbouring squire, came to Cawston after pretty Patty Comfort, – for Patty Comfort was said to have been the prettiest girl in Devonshire; – and when Patty Comfort had been allowed to go to the assemblies at Torquay almost on purpose to meet him, Mrs. Ray had thought it all right, because it had been presented to her mind as all right

by the Rector. Butler Cornbury had married Patty Comfort and it was all right. But had she heard of Patty's dancings without the assistance of a few hints from Mr. Comfort himself, her mind would have worked in a different way.

She certainly desired that her own child Rachel should some day find a husband, and Rachel was already older than she had been when she married, or than Mrs. Prime had been at her wedding; but, nevertheless, there was something terrible in the very thought of – a young man; and she, though she would fain have defended her child, hardly knew how to do so otherwise than by discrediting the words of Miss Pucker. "She always was very ill-natured, you know," Mrs. Ray ventured to hint.

"Mother!" said Mrs. Prime, in that peculiarly stern voice of hers. "There can be no reason for supposing that Miss Pucker wishes to malign the child. It is my belief that Rachel will be in Baslehurst this evening. If so, she probably intends to meet him again."

"I know she is going into Baslehurst after tea," said Mrs. Ray, "because she has promised to walk with the Miss Tappitts. She told me so."

"Exactly; – with the brewery girls! Oh, mother!" Now it is certainly true that the three Miss Tappitts were the daughters of Bungall and Tappitt, the old-established brewers of Baslehurst. They were, at least, the actual children of Mr. Tappitt, who was the sole surviving partner in the brewery. The name of Bungall had for many years been used merely to give solidity

and standing to the Tappitt family. The Miss Tappitts certainly came from the brewery, and Miss Pucker had said that the young man came from the same quarter. There was ground in this for much suspicion, and Mrs. Ray became uneasy. This conversation between the two widows had occurred before dinner at the cottage on a Saturday; – and it was after dinner that the elder sister had endeavoured to persuade the younger one to accompany her to the Dorcas workshop; – but had endeavoured in vain.

CHAPTER II.
THE YOUNG MAN FROM THE BREWERY

There were during the summer months four Dorcas afternoons held weekly in Baslehurst, at all of which Mrs. Prime presided. It was her custom to start soon after dinner, so as to reach the working room before three o'clock, and there she would remain till nine, or as long as the daylight remained. The meeting was held in a sitting room belonging to Miss Pucker, for the use of which the Institution paid some moderate rent. The other ladies, all belonging to Baslehurst, were accustomed to go home to tea in the middle of their labours; but, as Mrs. Prime could not do this because of the distance, she remained with Miss Pucker, paying for such refreshment as she needed. In this way there came to be a great friendship between Mrs. Prime and Miss Pucker; – or rather, perhaps, Mrs. Prime thus obtained the services of a most obedient minister. Rachel had on various occasions gone with her sister to the Dorcas meetings, and once or twice had remained at Miss Pucker's house, drinking tea there. But this she greatly disliked. She was aware, when she did so, that her sister paid for her, and she thought that Dorothea showed by her behaviour that she was mistress of the entertainment. And then Rachel greatly disliked Miss Pucker.

She disliked that lady's squint, she disliked the tone of her voice, she disliked her subservience to Mrs. Prime, and she especially disliked the vehemence of her objection to – young men. When Rachel had last left Miss Pucker's room she had resolved that she would never again drink tea there. She had not said to herself positively that she would attend no more of the Dorcas meetings; – but as regarded their summer arrangement this resolve against the tea-drinking amounted almost to the same thing.

It was on this account, I protest, and by no means on account of that young man from the brewery, that Rachel had with determination opposed her sister's request on this special Saturday. And the refusal had been made in an unaccustomed manner, owing to the request also having been pressed with unusual vigour.

"Rachel, I particularly wish it, and I think that you ought to come," Dorothea had said.

"I had rather not come, Dolly."

"That means," continued Mrs. Prime, "that you prefer your pleasure to your duty; – that you boldly declare yourself determined to neglect that which you know you ought to do."

"I don't know any such thing," said Rachel.

"If you think of it you will know it," said Mrs. Prime.

"At any rate I don't mean to go to Miss Pucker's this afternoon." – Then Rachel left the room.

It was immediately after this conversation that Mrs. Prime uttered to Mrs. Ray that terrible hint about the young man; and at

the same time uttered another hint by which she strove to impress upon her mother that Rachel ought to be kept in subordination, – in fact, that the power should not belong to Rachel of choosing whether she would or would not go to Dorcas meetings. In all such matters, according to Dorothea's view of the case, Rachel should do as she was bidden. But then how was Rachel to be made to do as she was bidden? How was her sister to enforce her attendance? Obedience in this world depends as frequently on the weakness of him who is governed as on the strength of him who governs. That man who was going to the left is ordered by you with some voice of command to go to the right. When he hesitates you put more command into your voice, more command into your eyes, – and then he obeys. Mrs. Prime had tried this, but Rachel had not turned to the right. When Mrs. Prime applied for aid to their mother, it was a sign that the power of command was going from herself. After dinner the elder sister made another little futile attempt, and then, when she had again failed, she trudged off with her basket.

Mrs. Ray and Rachel were left sitting at the open window, looking out upon the mignionette. It was now in July, when the summer sun is at the hottest, – and in those southern parts of Devonshire the summer sun in July is very hot. There is no other part of England like it. The lanes are low and narrow, and not a breath of air stirs through them. The ground rises in hills on all sides, so that every spot is a sheltered nook. The rich red earth drinks in the heat and holds it, and no breezes come up from

the southern torpid sea. Of all counties in England Devonshire is the fairest to the eye; but, having known it in its summer glory, I must confess that those southern regions are not fitted for much noonday summer walking.

"I'm afraid she'll find it very hot with that big basket," said Mrs. Ray, after a short pause. It must not be supposed that either she or Rachel were idle because they remained at home. They both had their needles in their hands, and Rachel was at work, not on that coloured frock of her own which had roused her sister's suspicion, but on needful aid to her mother's Sunday gown.

"She might have left it in Baslehurst if she liked," said Rachel, "or I would have carried it for her as far as the bridge, only that she was so angry with me when she went."

"I don't think she was exactly angry, Rachel."

"Oh, but she was, mamma; – very angry. I know by her way of flinging out of the house."

"I think she was sorry because you would not go with her."

"But I don't like going there, mamma. I don't like that Miss Pucker. I can't go without staying to tea, and I don't like drinking tea there." Then there was a little pause. "You don't want me to go; – do you, mamma? How would the things get done here? and you can't like having your tea alone."

"No; I don't like that at all," said Mrs. Ray. But she hardly thought of what she was saying. Her mind was away, working on the subject of that young man. She felt that it was her duty to say something to Rachel, and yet she did not know what to

say. Was she to quote Miss Pucker? It went, moreover, sorely against the grain with her to disturb the comfort of their present happy moments by any disagreeable allusion. The world gave her nothing better than those hours in which Rachel was alone with her, – in which Rachel tended her and comforted her. No word had been said on a subject so wicked and full of vanity, but Mrs. Ray knew that her evening meal would be brought in at half-past five in the shape of a little feast, – a feast which would not be spread if Mrs. Prime had remained at home. At five o'clock Rachel would slip away and make hot toast, and would run over the Green to Farmer Sturt's wife for a little thick cream, and there would be a batter cake, and so there would be a feast. Rachel was excellent at the preparation of such banquets, knowing how to coax the teapot into a good drawing humour, and being very clever in little comforts; and she would hover about her mother, in a way very delightful to that lady, making the widow feel for the time that there was a gleam of sunshine in the valley of tribulation. All that must be over for this afternoon if she spoke of Miss Pucker and the young man. Yes; and must it not be over for many an afternoon to come? If there were to be distrust between her and Rachel what would her life be worth to her?

But yet there was her duty! As she sat there looking out into the garden indistinct ideas of what were a mother's duties to her child lay heavy on her mind, – ideas which were very indistinct, but which were not on that account the less powerful in their operation. She knew that it behoved her to sacrifice everything

to her child's welfare, but she did not know what special sacrifice she was at this moment called upon to make. Would it be well that she should leave this matter altogether in the hands of Mrs. Prime, and thus, as it were, abdicate her own authority? Mrs. Prime would undertake such a task with much more skill and power of language than she could use. But then would this be fair to Rachel, and would Rachel obey her sister? Any explicit direction from herself, – if only she could bring herself to give any, – Rachel would, she thought, obey. In this way she resolved that she would break the ice and do her duty.

"Are you going into Baslehurst this evening, dear?" she said.

"Yes, mamma; I shall walk in after tea; – that is if you don't want me. I told the Miss Tappitts I would meet them."

"No; I shan't want you. But Rachel – "

"Well, mamma?"

Mrs. Ray did not know how to do it. The matter was surrounded with difficulties. How was she to begin, so as to introduce the subject of the young man without shocking her child and showing an amount of distrust which she did not feel? "Do you like those Miss Tappitts?" she said.

"Yes; – in a sort of a way. They are very good-natured, and one likes to know somebody. I think they are nicer than Miss Pucker."

"Oh, yes; – I never did like Miss Pucker myself. But, Rachel – "

"What is it, mamma? I know you've something to say, and that

you don't half like to say it. Dolly has been telling tales about me, and you want to lecture me, only you haven't got the heart. Isn't that it, mamma?" Then she put down her work, and coming close up to her mother, knelt before her and looked up into her face. "You want to scold me, and you haven't got the heart to do it."

"My darling, my darling," said the mother, stroking her child's soft smooth hair. "I don't want to scold you; – I never want to scold you. I hate scolding anybody."

"I know you do, mamma."

"But they have told me something which has frightened me."

"They! who are they?"

"Your sister told me, and Miss Pucker told her."

"Oh, Miss Pucker! What business has Miss Pucker with me? If she is to come between us all our happiness will be over." Then Rachel rose from her knees and began to look angry, whereupon her mother was more frightened than ever. "But let me hear it, mamma. I've no doubt it is something very awful."

Mrs. Ray looked at her daughter with beseeching eyes, as though praying to be forgiven for having introduced a subject so disagreeable. "Dorothea says that on Wednesday evening you were walking under the churchyard elms with – that young man from the brewery."

At any rate everything had been said now. The extent of the depravity with which Rachel was to be charged had been made known to her in the very plainest terms. Mrs. Ray as she uttered the terrible words turned first pale and then red, –

pale with fear and red with shame. As soon as she had spoken them she wished the words unsaid. Her dislike to Miss Pucker amounted almost to hatred. She felt bitterly even towards her own eldest daughter. She looked timidly into Rachel's face and unconsciously construed into their true meaning those lines which formed themselves on the girl's brow and over her eyes.

"Well, mamma; and what else?" said Rachel.

"Dorothea thinks that perhaps you are going into Baslehurst to meet him again."

"And suppose I am?"

From the tone in which this question was asked it was clear to Mrs. Ray that she was expected to answer it. And yet what answer could she make?

It had never occurred to her that her child would take upon herself to defend such conduct as that imputed to her, or that any question would be raised as to the propriety or impropriety of the proceeding. She was by no means prepared to show why it was so very terrible and iniquitous. She regarded it as a sin, – known to be a sin generally, – as is stealing or lying. "Suppose I am going to walk with him again? what then?"

"Oh, Rachel, who is he? I don't even know his name. I didn't believe it, when Dorothea told me; only as she did tell me I thought I ought to mention it. Oh dear, oh dear! I hope there is nothing wrong. You were always so good; – I can't believe anything wrong of you."

"No, mamma; – don't. Don't think evil of me."

"I never did, my darling."

"I am not going into Baslehurst to walk with Mr. Rowan; – for I suppose it is him you mean."

"I don't know, my dear; I never heard the young man's name."

"It is Mr. Rowan. I did walk with him along the churchyard path when that woman with her sharp squinting eyes saw me. He does belong to the brewery. He is related in some way to the Tappitts, and was a nephew of old Mrs. Bungall's. He is there as a clerk, and they say he is to be a partner, – only I don't think he ever will, for he quarrels with Mr. Tappitt."

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. Ray.

"And now, mamma, you know as much about him as I do; only this, that he went to Exeter this morning, and does not come back till Monday, so that it is impossible that I should meet him in Baslehurst this evening; – and it was very unkind of Dolly to say so; very unkind indeed." Then Rachel gave way and began to cry.

It certainly did seem to Mrs. Ray that Rachel knew a good deal about Mr. Rowan. She knew of his kith and kin, she knew of his prospects and what was like to mar his prospects, and she knew also of his immediate proceedings, whereabouts, and intentions. Mrs. Ray did not logically draw any conclusion from these premises, but she became uncomfortably assured that there did exist a considerable intimacy between Mr. Rowan and her daughter. And how had it come to pass that this had been allowed to form itself without any knowledge on her part? Miss Pucker

might be odious and disagreeable; – Mrs. Ray was inclined to think that the lady in question was very odious and disagreeable; – but must it not be admitted that her little story about the young man had proved itself to be true?

"I never will go to those nasty rag meetings any more."

"Oh Rachel, don't speak in that way."

"But I won't. I will never put my foot in that woman's room again. They talk nothing but scandal all the time they are there, and speak any ill they can of the poor young girls whom they talk about. If you don't mind my knowing Mr. Rowan, what is it to them?"

But this was assuming a great deal. Mrs. Ray was by no means prepared to say that she did not object to her daughter's acquaintance with Mr. Rowan. "But I don't know anything about him, my dear. I never heard his name before."

"No, mamma; you never did. And I know very little of him; so little that there has been nothing to tell, – at least next to nothing. I don't want to have any secrets from you, mamma."

"But, Rachel, – he isn't, is he – ? I mean there isn't anything particular between him and you? How was it you were walking with him alone?"

"I wasn't walking with him alone; – at least only for a little way. He had been out with his cousins and we had all been together, and when they went in, of course I was obliged to come home. I couldn't help his coming along the churchyard path with me. And what if he did, mamma? He couldn't bite me."

"But my dear – "

"Oh mamma; – don't be afraid of me." Then she came across, and again knelt at her mother's feet. "If you'll trust me I'll tell you everything."

Upon hearing this assurance, Mrs. Ray of course promised Rachel that she would trust her and expected in return to be told everything then, at the moment. But she perceived that her daughter did not mean to tell her anything further at that time. Rachel, when she had received her mother's promise, embraced her warmly, caressing her and petting her as was her custom, and then after a while she resumed her work. Mrs. Ray was delighted to have the evil thing over, but she could not but feel that the conversation had not terminated as it should have done.

Soon after that the hour arrived for their little feast, and Rachel went about her work just as merrily and kindly as though there had been no words about the young man. She went across for the cream, and stayed gossiping for some few minutes with Mrs. Sturt. Then she bustled about the kitchen making the tea and toasting the bread. She had never been more anxious to make everything comfortable for her mother, and never more eager in her coaxing way of doing honour to the good things which she had prepared; but, through it all, her mother was aware that everything was not right; there was something in Rachel's voice which betrayed inward uneasiness; – something in the vivacity of her movements that was not quite true to her usual nature. Mrs. Ray felt that it was so, and could not therefore be altogether at

her ease. She pretended to enjoy herself; – but Rachel knew that her joy was not real. Nothing further, however, was said, either regarding that evening's walk into Baslehurst, or touching that other walk as to which Miss Pucker's tale had been told. Mrs. Ray had done as much as her courage enabled her to attempt on that occasion.

When the tea-drinking was over, and the cups and spoons had been tidily put away, Rachel prepared herself for her walk. She had been very careful that nothing should be hurried, – that there should be no apparent anxiety on her part to leave her mother quickly. And even when all was done, she would not go without some assurance of her mother's goodwill. "If you have any wish that I should stay, mamma, I don't care in the least about going."

"No, my dear; I don't want you to stay at all."

"Your dress is finished."

"Thank you, my dear; you have been very good."

"I haven't been good at all; but I will be good if you'll trust me."

"I will trust you."

"At any rate you need not be afraid to-night, for I am only going to take a walk with those three girls across the church meadows. They're always very civil, and I don't like to turn my back upon them."

"I don't wish you to turn your back upon them."

"It's stupid not to know anybody; isn't it?"

"I dare say it is," said Mrs. Ray. Then Rachel had finished

tying on her hat, and she walked forth.

For more than two hours after that the widow sat alone, thinking of her children. As regarded Mrs. Prime, there was at any rate no cause for trembling, timid thoughts. She might be regarded as being safe from the world's wicked allurements. She was founded like a strong rock, and was, with her stedfast earnestness, a staff on which her weaker mother might lean with security. But then she was so stern, – and her very strength was so oppressive! Rachel was weaker, more worldly, given terribly to vain desires and thoughts that were almost wicked; but then it was so pleasant to live with her! And Rachel, though weak and worldly and almost wicked, was so very good and kind and sweet! As Mrs. Ray thought of this she began to doubt whether, after all, the world was so very bad a place, and whether the wickedness of tea and toast, and of other creature comforts, could be so very great. "I wonder what sort of a young man he is," she said to herself.

Mrs. Prime's return was always timed with the regularity of clockwork. At this period of the year she invariably came in exactly at half-past nine. Mrs. Ray was very anxious that Rachel should come in first, so that nothing should be said of her walk on this evening. She had been unwilling to imply distrust by making any special request on this occasion, and had therefore said nothing on the subject as Rachel went; but she had carefully watched the clock, and had become uneasy as the time came round for Mrs. Prime's appearance. Exactly at half-past nine

she entered the house, bringing with her the heavy basket laden with work, and bringing with her also a face full of the deepest displeasure. She said nothing as she seated herself wearily on a chair against the wall; but her manner was such as to make it impossible that her mother should not notice it. "Is there anything wrong, Dorothea?" she said.

"Rachel has not come home yet, of course?" said Mrs. Prime.

"No; not yet. She is with the Miss Tappitts."

"No, mother, she is not with the Miss Tappitts: " and her voice, as she said these words, was dreadful to the mother's ears.

"Isn't she? I thought she was. Do you know where she is?"

"Who is to say where she is? Half an hour since I saw her alone with – "

"With whom? Not with that young man from the brewery, for he is at Exeter."

"Mother, he is here, – in Baslehurst! Half an hour since he and Rachel were standing alone together beneath the elms in the churchyard. I saw them with my own eyes."

CHAPTER III.
THE ARM IN THE CLOUDS

There was plenty of time for full inquiry and full reply between Mrs. Ray and Mrs. Prime before Rachel opened the cottage door, and interrupted them. It was then nearly half-past ten. Rachel had never been so late before. The last streak of the sun's reflection in the east had vanished, the last ruddy line of evening light had gone, and the darkness of the coming night was upon them. The hour was late for any girl such as Rachel Ray to be out alone.

There had been a long discussion between the mother and the elder daughter; and Mrs. Ray, believing implicitly in the last announcements made to her, was full of fears for her child. The utmost rigour of self-denying propriety should have been exercised by Rachel, whereas her conduct had been too dreadful almost to be described. Two or three hours since Mrs. Ray had fondly promised that she would trust her younger daughter, and had let her forth alone, proud in seeing her so comely as she went. An idea had almost entered her mind that if the young man was very steady, such an acquaintance might perhaps be not altogether wicked. But everything was changed now. All the happiness of her trust was gone. All her sweet hopes were crushed. Her heart was filled with fear, and her face was pale with sorrow.

"Why should she know where he was to be?" Dorothea had

asked. "But he is not at Exeter; – he is here, and she was with him." Then the two had sat gloomily together till Rachel returned. As she came in there was a little forced laugh upon her face. "I am late; am I not?" she said. "Oh, Rachel, very late!" said her mother. "It is half-past ten," said Mrs. Prime. "Oh, Dolly, don't speak with that terrible voice, as though the world were coming to an end," said Rachel; and she looked up almost savagely, showing that she was resolved to fight.

But it may be as well to say a few words about the firm of Messrs. Bungall and Tappitt, about the Tappitt family generally, and about Mr. Luke Rowan, before any further portion of the history of that evening is written.

Why there should have been any brewery at all at Baslehurst, seeing that everybody in that part of the world drinks cider, or how, under such circumstances, Messrs. Bungall and Tappitt had managed to live upon the proceeds of their trade, I cannot pretend to say. Baslehurst is in the heart of the Devonshire cider country. It is surrounded by orchards, and farmers talk there of their apples as they do of their cheese in Cheshire, or their wheat in Essex, or their sheep in Lincolnshire. Men drink cider by the gallon, – by the gallon daily; cider presses are to be found at every squire's house, at every parsonage, and every farm homestead. The trade of a brewer at Baslehurst would seem to be as profitless as that of a breeches-maker in the Highlands, or a shoemaker in Connaught; – but nevertheless Bungall and Tappitt had been brewers in Baslehurst for the last fifty years, and had managed

to live out of their brewery.

It is not to be supposed that they were great men like the mighty men of beer known of old, – such as Barclay and Perkins, or Reid and Co. Nor were they new, and pink, and prosperous, going into Parliament for this borough and that, just as they pleased, like the modern heroes of the bitter cask. When the student at Oxford was asked what man had most benefited humanity, and when he answered "Bass," I think that he should not have been plucked. It was a fair average answer. But no student at any university could have said as much for Bungall and Tappitt without deserving utter disgrace, and whatever penance an outraged examiner could inflict. It was a sour and muddy stream that flowed from their vats; a beverage disagreeable to the palate, and very cold and uncomfortable to the stomach. Who drank it I could never learn. It was to be found at no respectable inn. It was admitted at no private gentleman's table. The farmers knew nothing of it. The labourers drenched themselves habitually with cider. Nevertheless the brewery of Messrs. Bungall and Tappitt was kept going, and the large ugly square brick house in which the Tappitt family lived was warm and comfortable. There is something in the very name of beer that makes money.

Old Bungall, he who first established the house, was still remembered by the seniors of Baslehurst, but he had been dead more than twenty years before the period of my story. He had been a short, fat old man, not much above five feet high, very silent, very hard, and very ignorant. But he had understood

business, and had established the firm on a solid foundation. Late in life he had taken into partnership his nephew Tappitt, and during his life had been a severe taskmaster to his partner. Indeed the firm had only assumed its present name on the demise of Bungall. As long as he had lived it had been Bungall's brewery. When the days of mourning were over, then – and not till then – Mr. Tappitt had put up a board with the joint names of the firm as at present called.

It was believed in Baslehurst that Mr. Bungall had not bequeathed his undivided interest in the concern to his nephew. Indeed people went so far as to say that he had left away from Mr. Tappitt all that he could leave. The truth in that respect may as well be told at once. His widow had possessed a third of the profits of the concern, in lieu of her right to a full half share in the concern, which would have carried with it the onus of a full half share of the work. That third and those rights she had left to her nephew, – or rather to her great-nephew, Luke Rowan. It was not, however, in this young man's power to walk into the brewery and claim a seat there as a partner. It was not in his power to do so, even if such should be his wish. When old Mrs. Bungall died at Dawlish at the very advanced age of ninety-seven, there came to be, as was natural, some little dispute between Mr. Tappitt and his distant connection, Luke Rowan. Mr. Tappitt suggested that Luke should take a thousand pounds down, and walk forth free from all contamination of malt and hops. Luke's attorney asked for ten thousand. Luke Rowan at the time was articled to a

lawyer in London, and as the dinginess of the chambers which he frequented in Lincoln's Inn Fields appeared to him less attractive than the beautiful rivers of Devonshire, he offered to go into the brewery as a partner. It was at last settled that he should place himself there as a clerk for twelve months, drawing a certain moderate income out of the concern; and that if at the end of the year he should show himself to be able, and feel himself to be willing, to act as a partner, the firm should be changed to Tappitt and Rowan, and he should be established permanently as a Baslehurst brewer. Some information, however, beyond this has already been given to the reader respecting Mr. Rowan's prospects. "I don't think he ever will be a partner," Rachel had said to her mother, "because he quarrels with Mr. Tappitt." She had been very accurate in her statement. Mr. Rowan had now been three months at Baslehurst, and had not altogether found the ways of his relative pleasant. Mr. Tappitt wished to treat him as a clerk, whereas he wished to be treated as a partner. And Mr. Tappitt had by no means found the ways of the young man to be pleasant. Young Rowan was not idle, nor did he lack intelligence; indeed he possessed more energy and cleverness than, in Tappitt's opinion, were necessary to the position of a brewer in Baslehurst; but he was by no means willing to use these good gifts in the manner indicated by the sole existing owner of the concern. Mr. Tappitt wished that Rowan should learn brewing seated on a stool, and that the lessons should be purely arithmetical. Luke was instructed as to the use of certain

dull, dingy, disagreeable ledgers, and informed that in them lay the natural work of a brewer. But he desired to learn the chemical action of malt and hops upon each other, and had not been a fortnight in the concern before he suggested to Mr. Tappitt that by a salutary process, which he described, the liquor might be made less muddy. "Let us brew good beer," he had said; and then Tappitt had known that it would not do. "Yes," said Tappitt, "and sell for twopence a pint what will cost you threepence to make!" "That's what we've got to look to," said Rowan. "I believe it can be done for the money, – only one must learn how to do it." "I've been at it all my life," Tappitt said. "Yes, Mr. Tappitt; but it is only now that men are beginning to appreciate all that chemistry can do for them. If you'll allow me I'll make an experiment on a small scale." After that Mr. Tappitt had declared emphatically to his wife that Luke Rowan should never become a partner of his. "He would ruin any business in the world," said Tappitt. "And as to conceit!" It is true that Rowan was conceited, and perhaps true also that he would have ruined the brewery had he been allowed to have his own way.

But Mrs. Tappitt by no means held him in such aversion as did her husband. He was a well-grown, good-looking young man for whom his friends had made comfortable provision, and Mrs. Tappitt had three marriageable daughters. Her ideas on the subject of young men in general were by no means identical with those held by Mrs. Ray. She was aware how frequently it happened that a young partner would marry a daughter of the

senior in the house, and it seemed to her that special provision for such an arrangement was made in this case. Young Rowan was living in her house, and was naturally thrown into great intimacy with her girls. It was clear to her quick eye that he was of a susceptible disposition, fond of ladies' society, and altogether prone to those pleasant pre-matrimonial conversations, from the effects of which it is so difficult for an inexperienced young man to make his escape. Mrs. Tappitt was minded to devote to him Augusta, the second of her flock, – but not so minded with any obstinacy of resolution. If Luke should prefer Martha, the elder, or Cherry, the younger girl, Mrs. Tappitt would make no objection; but she expected that he should do his duty by taking one of them. "Laws, T., don't be so foolish," she said to her husband, when he made his complaint to her. She always called her husband T., unless when the solemnity of some special occasion justified her in addressing him as Mr. Tappitt. To have called him Tom or Thomas, would, in her estimation, have been very vulgar. "Don't be so foolish. Did you never have to do with a young man before? Those tantrums will all blow off when he gets himself into harness." The tantrums spoken of were Rowan's insane desire to brew good beer, but they were of so fatal a nature that Tappitt was determined not to submit himself to them. Luke Rowan should never be partner of his, – not though he had twenty daughters waiting to be married!

Rachel had been acquainted with the Tappitts before young Rowan had come to Baslehurst, and had been made known to

him by them all collectively. Had they shared their mother's prudence they would probably not have done anything so rash. Rachel was better-looking than either of them, – though that fact perhaps might not have been known to them. But in justice to them all I must say that they lacked their mother's prudence. They were good-humoured, laughing, ordinary girls, – very much alike, with long brown curls, fresh complexions, large mouths, and thick noses. Augusta was rather the taller of the three, and therefore, in her mother's eyes, the beauty. But the girls themselves, when their distant cousin had come amongst them, had not thought of appropriating him. When, after the first day, they became intimate with him, they promised to introduce him to the beauties of the neighbourhood, and Cherry had declared her conviction that he would fall in love with Rachel Ray directly he saw her. "She is tall, you know," said Cherry, "a great deal taller than us." "Then I'm sure I shan't like her," Luke had said. "Oh, but you must like her, because she is a friend of ours," Cherry had answered; "and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you fell violently in love with her." Mrs. Tappitt did not hear all this, but, nevertheless, she began to entertain a dislike to Rachel. It must not be supposed that she admitted her daughter Augusta to any participation in her plans. Mrs. Tappitt could scheme for her child, but she could not teach her child to scheme. As regarded the girl, it must all fall out after the natural, pleasant, everyday fashion of such things; but Mrs. Tappitt considered that her own natural advantages were so great that she could make the thing

fall out as she wished. When she was informed about a fortnight after Rowan's arrival in Baslehurst that Rachel Ray had been walking with the party from the brewery, she could not prevent herself from saying an ill-natured word or two. "Rachel Ray is all very well," she said, "but she is not the person whom you should show off to a stranger as your particular friend."

"Why not, mamma?" said Cherry.

"Why not, my dear! There are reasons why not. Mrs. Ray is very well in her way, but – "

"Her husband was a gentleman," said Martha, "and a great friend of Mr. Comfort's."

"My dear, I have nothing to say against her," said the mother, "only this; that she does not go among the people we know. There is Mrs. Prime, the other daughter; her great friend is Miss Pucker. I don't suppose you want to be very intimate with Miss Pucker." The brewer's wife had a position in Baslehurst and wished that her daughters should maintain it.

It will now be understood in what way Rachel had formed her acquaintance with Luke Rowan, and I think it may certainly be admitted that she had been guilty of no great impropriety; – unless, indeed, she had been wrong in saying nothing of the acquaintance to her mother. Previous to those ill-natured tidings brought home as to the first churchyard meeting, Rachel had seen him but twice. On the first occasion she had thought but little of it, – but little of Luke himself or of her acquaintance with him. In simple truth the matter had passed from her mind, and

therefore she had not spoken of it. When they met the second time, Luke had walked much of the way home with her, – with her alone, – having joined himself to her when the Tappitt girls went into their house as Rachel had afterwards described to her mother. In all that she had said she had spoken absolutely the truth; but it cannot be pleaded on her behalf that after this second meeting with Mr. Rowan she had said nothing of him because she had thought nothing. She had indeed thought much, but it had seemed well to her to keep her thoughts to herself.

The Tappitt girls had by no means given up their friend because their mother had objected to Miss Pucker; and when Rachel met them on that Saturday evening, – that fatal Saturday, – they were very gracious to her. The brewery at Baslehurst stood on the outskirts of the town, in a narrow lane which led from the church into the High-street. This lane, – Brewery-lane, as it was called, – was not the main approach to the church; but from the lane there was a stile into the churchyard, and a gate, opened on Sundays, by which people on that side reached the church. From the opposite side of the churchyard a road led away to the foot of the High-street, and out towards the bridge which divided the town from the parish of Cawston. Along one side of this road there was a double row of elms, having a footpath beneath them. This old avenue began within the churchyard, running across the lower end of it, and was continued for some two hundred yards beyond its precincts. This, then, would be the way which Rachel would naturally take in

going home, after leaving the Miss Tappitts at their door; but it was by no means the way which was the nearest for Mrs. Prime after leaving Miss Pucker's lodgings in the High-street, seeing that the High-street itself ran direct to Cawston bridge.

And it must also be explained that there was a third path out of the churchyard, not leading into any road, but going right away across the fields. The church stood rather high, so that the land sloped away from it towards the west, and the view there was very pretty. The path led down through a small field, with high hedgerows, and by orchards, to two little hamlets belonging to Baslehurst, and this was a favourite walk with the people of the town. It was here that Rachel had walked with the Miss Tappitts on that evening when Luke Rowan had first accompanied her as far as Cawston bridge, and it was here that they agreed to walk again on the Saturday when Rowan was supposed to be away at Exeter. Rachel was to come along under the elms, and was to meet her friends there, or in the churchyard, or, if not so, then she was to call for them at the brewery.

She found the three girls leaning against the rails near the churchyard stile. "We have been waiting ever so long," said Cherry, who was more specially Rachel's friend.

"Oh, but I said you were not to wait," said Rachel, "for I never am quite sure whether I can come."

"We knew you'd come," said Augusta, "because – "

"Because what?" asked Rachel.

"Because nothing," said Cherry. "She's only joking."

Rachel said nothing more, not having understood the point of the joke. The joke was this, – that Luke Rowan had come back from Exeter, and that Rachel was supposed to have heard of his return, and therefore that her coming for the walk was certain. But Augusta had not intended to be ill-natured, and had not really believed what she had been about to insinuate. "The fact is," said Martha, "that Mr. Rowan has come home; but I don't suppose we shall see anything of him this evening as he is busy with papa."

Rachel for a few minutes became silent and thoughtful. Her mind had not yet freed itself from the effects of her conversation with her mother, and she had been thinking of this young man during the whole of her solitary walk into town. But she had been thinking of him as we think of matters which need not put us to any immediate trouble. He was away at Exeter, and she would have time to decide whether or no she would admit his proffered intimacy before she should see him again. "I do so hope we shall be friends," he had said to her as he gave her his hand when they parted on Cawston bridge. And then he had muttered something, which she had not quite caught, as to Baslehurst being altogether another place to him since he had seen her. She had hurried home on that occasion with a feeling, half pleasant and half painful, that something out of the usual course had occurred to her. But, after all, it amounted to nothing. What was there that she could tell her mother? She had no special tale to tell, and yet she could not speak of young Rowan as she would have spoken of a chance acquaintance. Was she not conscious that he

had pressed her hand warmly as he parted from her?

Rachel herself entertained much of that indefinite fear of young men which so strongly pervaded her mother's mind, and which, as regarded her sister, had altogether ceased to be indefinite. Rachel knew that they were the natural enemies of her special class, and that any kind of friendship might be allowed to her, except a friendship with any of them. And as she was a good girl, loving her mother, anxious to do well, guided by pure thoughts, she felt aware that Mr. Rowan should be shunned. Had it not been that he himself had told her that he was to be in Exeter, she would not have come out to walk with the brewery girls on that evening. What she might hereafter decide upon doing, how these affairs might be made to arrange themselves, she by no means could foresee; – but on that evening she had thought she would be safe, and therefore she had come out to walk.

"What do you think?" said Cherry; "we are going to have a party next week."

"It won't be till the week after," said Augusta.

"At any rate, we are going to have a party, and you must come. You'll get a regular invite, you know, when they're sent out. Mr. Rowan's mother and sister are coming down on a visit to us for a few days, and so we're going to be quite smart."

"I don't know about going to a party. I suppose it is for a dance?"

"Of course it is for a dance," said Martha.

"And of course you'll come and dance with Luke Rowan," said

Cherry. Nothing could be more imprudent than Cherry Tappitt, and Augusta was beginning to be aware of this, though she had not been allowed to participate in her mother's schemes. After that, there was much talking about the party, but the conversation was chiefly kept up by the Tappitt girls. Rachel was almost sure that her mother would not like her to go to a dance, and was quite sure that her sister would oppose such iniquity with all her power; therefore she made no promise. But she listened as the list was repeated of those who were expected to come, and asked some few questions as to Mrs. Rowan and her daughter. Then, at a sudden turn of a lane, a lane that led back to the town by another route, they met Luke Rowan himself.

He was a cousin of the Tappitts, and therefore, though the relationship was not near, he had already assumed the privilege of calling them by their Christian names; and Martha, who was nearly thirty years old, and four years his senior, had taught herself to call him Luke; with the other two he was as yet Mr. Rowan. The greeting was of course very friendly, and he returned with them on their path. To Rachel he raised his hat, and then offered his hand. She had felt herself to be confused the moment she saw him, – so confused that she was not able to ask him how he was with ordinary composure. She was very angry with herself, and heartily wished that she was seated with the Dorcas women at Miss Pucker's. Any position would have been better for her than this, in which she was disgracing herself and showing that she could not bear herself before this young

man as though he were no more than an ordinary acquaintance. Her mind would revert to that hand-squeezing, to those muttered words, and to her mother's caution. When he remarked to her that he had come back earlier than he expected, she could not take his words as though they signified nothing. His sudden return was a momentous fact to her, putting her out of her usual quiet mode of thought. She said little or nothing, and he, at any rate, did not observe that she was confused; but she was herself so conscious of it, that it seemed to her that all of them must have seen it.

Thus they sauntered along, back to the outskirts of the town, and so into the brewery lane, by a route opposite to that of the churchyard. The whole way they talked of nothing but the party. Was Miss Rowan fond of dancing? Then by degrees the girls called her Mary, declaring that as she was a cousin they intended so to do. And Luke said that he ought to be called by his Christian name; and the two younger girls agreed that he was entitled to the privilege, only they would ask mamma first; and in this way they were becoming very intimate. Rachel said but little, and perhaps not much that was said was addressed specially to her, but she seemed to feel that she was included in the friendliness of the gathering. Every now and then Luke Rowan would address her, and his voice was pleasant to her ears. He had made an effort to walk next to her, – an attempt almost too slight to be called an effort, which she had, almost unconsciously, frustrated, by so placing herself that Augusta should be between them. Augusta was not quite in a good humour, and said one or two words which

were slightly snubbing in their tendency; but this was more than atoned for by Cherry's high good-humour.

When they reached the brewery they all declared themselves to be very much astonished on learning that it was already past nine. Rachel's surprise, at any rate, was real. "I must go home at once," she said; "I don't know what mamma will think of me." And then, wishing them all good-bye, without further delay she hurried on into the churchyard.

"I'll see you safe through the ghosts at any rate," said Rowan.

"I'm not a bit afraid of churchyard ghosts," said Rachel, moving on. But Rowan followed her.

"I've got to go into town to meet your father," said he to the other girls, "and I'll be back with him."

Augusta saw with some annoyance that he had overtaken Rachel before she had passed over the stile, and stood lingering at the door long enough to be aware that Luke was over first. "That girl is a flirt, after all," she said to her sister Martha.

Luke was over the stile first, and then turned round to assist Miss Ray. She could not refuse him her hand in such a position; or if she could have done so she lacked the presence of mind that was necessary for such refusal. "You must let me walk home with you," he said.

"Indeed I will do no such thing. You told Augusta that you were going to her papa in the town."

"So I am, but I will see you first as far as the bridge; you can't refuse me that."

"Indeed I can, and indeed I will. I beg you won't come. I am sure you would not wish to annoy me."

"Look," said he, pointing to the west; "did you ever see such a setting sun as that? Did you ever see such blood-red colour?" The light was very wonderful, for the sun had just gone down and all the western heavens were crimson with its departing glory. In the few moments that they stood there gazing it might almost have been believed that some portentous miracle had happened, so deep and dark, and yet so bright, were the hues of the horizon. It seemed as though the lands below the hill were bathed in blood. The elm trees interrupted their view, so that they could only look out through the spaces between their trunks. "Come to the stile," said he. "If you were to live a thousand years you might never again see such a sunset as that. You would never forgive yourself if you missed it, just that you might save three minutes."

Rachel stepped with him towards the stile; but it was not solely his entreaty that made her do so. As he spoke of the sun's glory her sharp ear caught the sound of a woman's foot close to the stile over which she had passed, and knowing that she could not escape at once from Luke Rowan, she had left the main path through the churchyard, in order that the new comer might not see her there talking to him. So she accompanied him on till they stood between the trees, and then they remained encompassed as it were in the full light of the sun's rays. But if her ears had been sharp, so were the eyes of this new comer. And while she stood there with Rowan beneath the elms, her sister stood a while also

on the churchyard path and recognized the figures of them both.

"Rachel," said he, after they had remained there in silence for a moment, "live as long as you may, never on God's earth will you look on any sight more lovely than that. Ah! do you see the man's arm, as it were; the deep purple cloud, like a huge hand stretched out from some other world to take you? Do you see it?"

The sound of his voice was very pleasant. His words to her young ears seemed full of poetry and sweet mysterious romance. He spoke to her as no one, – no man or woman, – had ever spoken to her before. She had a feeling, as painful as it was delicious, that the man's words were sweet with a sweetness which she had known in her dreams. He had asked her a question, and repeated it, so that she was all but driven to answer him; but still she was full of the one great fact that he had called her Rachel, and that he must be rebuked for so calling her. But how could she rebuke a man who had bid her look at God's beautiful works in such language as he had used?

"Yes, I see it; it is very grand; but – "

"There were the fingers, but you see how they are melting away. The arm is there still, but the hand is gone. You and I can trace it because we saw it when it was clear, but we could not now show it to another. I wonder whether any one else saw that hand and arm, or only you and I. I should like to think that it was shown to us, and us only."

It was impossible for her now to go back upon that word Rachel. She must pass it by as though she had not heard it. "All

the world might have seen it had they looked," said she.

"Perhaps not. Do you think that all eyes can see alike?"

"Well, yes; I suppose so."

"All eyes will see a loaf of bread alike, or a churchyard stile, but all eyes will not see the clouds alike. Do you not often find worlds among the clouds? I do."

"Worlds!" she said, amazed at his energy; and then she bethought herself that he was right. She would never have seen that hand and arm had he not been there to show it her. So she gazed down upon the changing colours of the horizon, and almost forgot that she should not have lingered there a moment.

And yet there was a strong feeling upon her that she was sinking, – sinking, – sinking away into iniquity. She ought not to have stood there an instant, she ought not to have been there with him at all; – and yet she lingered. Now that she was there she hardly knew how to move herself away.

"Yes; worlds among the clouds," he continued; but before he did so there had been silence between them for a minute or two. "Do you never feel that you look into other worlds beyond this one in which you eat, and drink, and sleep? Have you no other worlds in your dreams?" Yes; such dreams she had known, and now, she almost thought that she could remember to have seen strange forms in the clouds. She knew that henceforth she would watch the clouds and find them there. She looked down into the flood of light beneath her, with a full consciousness that he was close to her, touching her; with a full consciousness that

every moment that she lingered there was a new sin; with a full consciousness, too, that the beauty of those fading colours seen thus in his presence possessed a charm, a sense of soft delight, which she had never known before. At last she uttered a long sigh.

"Why, what ails you?" said he.

"Oh, I must go; I have been so wrong to stand here. Good-bye; pray, pray do not come with me."

"But you will shake hands with me." Then he got her hand, and held it. "Why should it be wrong for you to stand and look at the sunset? Am I an ogre? Have I done anything that should make you afraid of me?"

"Do not hold me. Mr. Rowan I did not think you would behave like that." The gloom of the evening was now coming on, and though but a few minutes had passed since Mrs. Prime had walked through the churchyard, she would not have been able to recognize them had she walked there now. "It is getting dark, and I must go instantly."

"Let me go with you, then, as far as the bridge."

"No, no, no. Pray do not vex me."

"I will not. You shall go alone. But stand while I say one word to you. Why should you be afraid of me?"

"I am not afraid of you, – at least, – you know what I mean."

"I wonder, – I wonder whether – you dislike me."

"I don't dislike anybody. Good-night."

He had however again got her hand. "I'll tell you why I ask; – because I like you so much, so very much! Why should we not

be friends? Well; there. I will not trouble you now. I will not stir from here till you are out of sight. But mind, – remember this; I intend that you shall like me."

She was gone from him, fleeing away along the path in a run while the last words were being spoken; and yet, though they were spoken in a low voice, she heard and remembered every syllable. What did the man mean by saying that he intended that she should like him? Like him! How could she fail of liking him? Only was it not incumbent on her to take some steps which might save her from ever seeing him again? Like him, indeed! What was the meaning of the word? Had he intended to ask her to love him? And if so, what answer must she make?

How beautiful had been those clouds! As soon as she was beyond the church wall, so that she could look again to the west, she gazed with all her eyes to see if there were still a remnant left of that arm. No; it had all melted into a monstrous shape, indistinct and gloomy, partaking of the darkness of night. The brightness of the vision was gone. But he bade her look into the clouds for new worlds, and she seemed to feel that there was a hidden meaning in his words. As she looked out into the coming darkness, a mystery crept over her, a sense of something wonderful that was out there, away, – of something so full of mystery that she could not tell whether she was thinking of the hidden distances of the horizon, or of the distances of her own future life, which were still further off and more closely hidden. She found herself trembling, sighing, almost sobbing, and then

she ran again. He had wrapped her in his influence, and filled her full of the magnetism of his own being. Her woman's weakness, – the peculiar susceptibility of her nature, had never before been touched. She had now heard the first word of romance that had ever reached her ears, and it had fallen upon her with so great a power that she was overwhelmed.

Words of romance! Words direct from the Evil One, Mrs. Prime would have called them! And in saying so she would have spoken the belief of many a good woman and many a good man. She herself was a good woman, – a sincere, honest, hardworking, self-denying woman; a woman who struggled hard to do her duty as she believed it had been taught to her. She, as she walked through the churchyard, – having come down the brewery lane with some inkling that her sister might be there, – had been struck with horror at seeing Rachel standing with that man. What should she do? She paused a moment to ask herself whether she should return for her; but she said to herself that her sister was obstinate, that a scene would be occasioned, that she would do no good, – and so she passed on. Words of romance, indeed! Must not all such words be words from the Father of Lies, seeing that they are words of falseness? Some such thoughts passed through her mind as she walked home, thinking of her sister's iniquity, – of her sister who must be saved, like a brand from the fire, but whose saving could now be effected only by the sternest of discipline. The hours at the Dorcas meetings must be made longer, and Rachel must always be there.

In the mean time Rachel hurried home with her spirits all a-tremble. Of her immediately-coming encounter with her mother and her sister she hardly thought much before she reached the door. She thought only of him, how beautiful he was, how grand, – and how dangerous; of him and of his words, how beautiful they were, how grand, and how terribly dangerous! She knew that it was very late and she hurried her steps. She knew that her mother must be appeased, and her sister must be opposed, – but neither to her mother or to her sister was given the depth of her thoughts. She was still thinking of him, and of the man's arm in the clouds, when she opened the door of the cottage at Bragg's End.

CHAPTER IV.
WHAT SHALL BE DONE ABOUT IT?

Rachel was still thinking of Luke Rowan and of the man's arm when she opened the cottage door, but the sight of her sister's face, and the tone of her sister's voice, soon brought her back to a full consciousness of her immediate present position. "Oh, Dolly, do not speak with that terrible voice, as though the world were coming to an end," she said, in answer to the first note of objurgation that was uttered; but the notes that came afterwards were so much more terrible, so much more severe, that Rachel found herself quite unable to stop them by any would-be joking tone.

Mrs. Prime was desirous that her mother should speak the words of censure that must be spoken. She would have preferred herself to remain silent, knowing that she could be as severe in her silence as in her speech, if only her mother would use the occasion as it should be used. Mrs. Ray had been made to feel how great was the necessity for outspoken severity; but when the moment came, and her dear beautiful child stood there before her, she could not utter the words with which she had been already prompted. "Oh, Rachel," she said, "Dorothea tells me – " and then she stopped.

"What has Dorothea told you?" asked Rachel.

"I have told her," said Mrs. Prime, now speaking out, "that I

saw you standing alone an hour since with that young man, – in the churchyard. And yet you had said that he was to have been away in Exeter!"

Rachel's cheeks and forehead were now suffused with red. We used to think, when we pretended to read the faces of our neighbours, that a rising blush betrayed a conscious falsehood. For the most part we know better now, and have learned to decipher more accurately the outward signs which are given by the impulses of the heart. An unmerited accusation of untruth will ever bring the blood to the face of the young and innocent. But Mrs. Ray was among the ignorant in this matter, and she groaned inwardly when she saw her child's confusion.

"Oh, Rachel, is it true?" she said.

"Is what true, mamma? It is true that Mr. Rowan spoke to me in the churchyard, though I did not know that Dorothea was acting as a spy on me."

"Rachel, Rachel!" said the mother.

"It is very necessary that some one should act the spy on you," said the sister. "A spy, indeed! You think to anger me by using such a word, but I will not be angered by any words. I went there to look after you, fearing that there was occasion, – fearing it, but hardly thinking it. Now we know that there was occasion."

"There was no occasion," said Rachel, looking into her sister's face with eyes of which the incipient strength was becoming manifest. "There was no occasion. Oh, mamma, you do not think there was an occasion for watching me?"

"Why did you say that that young man was at Exeter?" asked Mrs. Prime.

"Because he had told me that he would be there; – he had told us all so, as we were walking together. He came to-day instead of coming to-morrow. What would you say if I questioned you in that way about your friends?" Then, when the words had passed from her lips, she remembered that she should not have called Mr. Rowan her friend. She had never called him so, in thinking of him, to herself. She had never admitted that she had any regard for him. She had acknowledged to herself that it would be very dangerous to entertain friendship for such as he.

"Friend, Rachel!" said Mrs. Prime. "If you look for such friendship as that, who can say what will come to you?"

"I haven't looked for it. I haven't looked for anything. People do get to know each other without any looking, and they can't help it."

Then Mrs. Prime took off her bonnet and her shawl, and Rachel laid down her hat and her little light summer cloak; but it must not be supposed that the war was suspended during these operations. Mrs. Prime was aware that a great deal more must be said, but she was very anxious that her mother should say it. Rachel also knew that much more would be said, and she was by no means anxious that the subject should be dropped, if only she could talk her mother over to her side.

"If mother thinks it right," exclaimed Mrs. Prime, "that you should be standing alone with a young man after nightfall in the

churchyard, then I have done. In that case I will say no more. But I must tell her, and I must tell you also, that if it is to be so, I cannot remain at the cottage any longer."

"Oh, Dorothea!" said Mrs. Ray.

"Indeed, mother, I cannot. If Rachel is not hindered from such meetings by her own sense of what is right, she must be hindered by the authority of those older than herself."

"Hindered, – hindered from what?" said Rachel, who felt that her tears were coming, but struggled hard to retain them. "Mamma, I have done nothing that was wrong. Mamma, you will believe me, will you not?"

Mrs. Ray did not know what to say. She strove to believe both of them, though the words of one were directly at variance with the words of the other.

"Do you mean to claim it as your right," said Mrs. Prime, "to be standing out there alone at any hour of the night, with any young man that you please? If so, you cannot be my sister."

"I do not want to be your sister if you think such hard things," said Rachel, whose tears now could no longer be restrained. Honi soit qui mal y pense. She did not, at the moment, remember the words to speak them, but they contain exactly the purport of her thought. And now, having become conscious of her own weakness by reason of these tears which would overwhelm her, she determined that she would say nothing further till she pleaded her cause before her mother alone. How could she describe before her sister the way in which that interview at the churchyard

stile had been brought about? But she could kneel at her mother's feet and tell her everything; – she thought, at least, that she could tell her mother everything. She occupied generally the same bedroom as her sister; but, on certain occasions, – if her mother was unwell or the like, – she would sleep in her mother's room. "Mamma," she said, "you will let me sleep with you to-night. I will go now, and when you come I will tell you everything. Good night to you, Dolly."

"Good night, Rachel;" and the voice of Mrs. Prime, as she bade her sister adieu for the evening, sounded as the voice of the ravens.

The two widows sat in silence for a while, each waiting for the other to speak. Then Mrs. Prime got up and folded her shawl very carefully, and carefully put her bonnet and gloves down upon it. It was her habit to be very careful with her clothes, but in her anger she had almost thrown them upon the little sofa. "Will you have anything before you go to bed, Dorothea?" said Mrs. Ray. "Nothing, thank you," said Mrs. Prime; and her voice was very like the voice of the ravens. Then Mrs. Ray began to think it possible that she might escape away to Rachel without any further words. "I am very tired," she said, "and I think I will go, Dorothea."

"Mother," said Mrs. Prime, "something must be done about this."

"Yes, my dear; she will talk to me to-night, and tell it me all."

"But will she tell you the truth?"

"She never told me a falsehood yet, Dorothea. I'm sure she didn't know that the young man was to be here. You know if he did come back from Exeter before he said he would she couldn't help it."

"And do you mean that she couldn't help being with him there, – all alone? Mother, what would you think of any other girl of whom you heard such a thing?"

Mrs. Ray shuddered; and then some thought, some shadow perhaps of a remembrance, flitted across her mind, which seemed to have the effect of palliating her child's iniquity. "Suppose – " she said. "Suppose what?" said Mrs. Prime, sternly. But Mrs. Ray did not dare to go on with her supposition. She did not dare to suggest that Mr. Rowan might perhaps be a very proper young man, and that the two young people might be growing fond of each other in a proper sort of way. She hardly believed in any such propriety herself, and she knew that her daughter would scout it to the winds. "Suppose what?" said Mrs. Prime again, more sternly than before. "If the other girls left her and went away to the brewery, perhaps she could not have helped it," said Mrs. Ray.

"But she was not walking with him. Her face was not turned towards home even. They were standing together under the trees, and, judging from the time at which I got home, they must have remained together for nearly half an hour afterwards. And this with a perfect stranger, mother, – a man whose name she had never mentioned to us till she was told how Miss Pucker had seen

them together! You cannot suppose that I want to make her out worse than she is. She is your child, and my sister; and we are bound together for weal or for woe."

"You talked about going away and leaving us," said Mrs. Ray, speaking in soreness rather than in anger.

"So I did; and so I must, unless something be done. It could not be right that I should remain here, seeing such things, if my voice is not allowed to be heard. But though I did go, she would still be my sister. I should still share the sorrow, – and the shame."

"Oh, Dorothea, do not say such words."

"But they must be said, mother. Is it not from such meetings that shame comes, – shame, and sorrow, and sin? You love her dearly, and so do I; and are we therefore to allow her to be a castaway? Those whom you love you must chastise. I have no authority over her, – as she has told me, more than once already, – and therefore I say again, that unless all this be stopped, I must leave the cottage. Good night, now, mother. I hope you will speak to her in earnest." Then Mrs. Prime took her candle and went her way.

For ten minutes the mother sat herself down, thinking of the condition of her youngest daughter, and trying to think what words she would use when she found herself in her daughter's presence. Sorrow, and Shame, and Sin! Her child a castaway! What terrible words they were! And yet there had been nothing that she could allege in answer to them. That comfortable idea of a decent husband for her child had been banished from her

mind almost before it had been entertained. Then she thought of Rachel's eyes, and knew that she would not be able to assume a perfect mastery over her girl. When the ten minutes were over she had made up her mind to nothing, and then she also took up her candle and went to her room. When she first entered it she did not see Rachel. She had silently closed the door and come some steps within the chamber before her child showed herself from behind the bed. "Mamma," she said, "put down the candle that I may speak to you." Whereupon Mrs. Ray put down the candle, and Rachel took hold of both her arms. "Mamma, you do not believe ill of me; do you? You do not think of me the things that Dorothea says? Say that you do not, or I shall die."

"My darling, I have never thought anything bad of you before."

"And do you think bad of me now? Did you not tell me before I went out that you would trust me, and have you so soon forgotten your trust? Look at me, mamma. What have I ever done that you should think me to be such as she says?"

"I do not think that you have done anything; but you are very young, Rachel."

"Young, mamma! I am older than you were when you married, and older than Dolly was. I am old enough to know what is wrong. Shall I tell you what happened this evening? He came and met us all in the fields. I knew before that he had come back, for the girls had said so, but I thought that he was in Exeter when I left here. Had I not believed that, I should not have gone. I think I

should not have gone."

"Then you are afraid of him?"

"No, mamma; I am not afraid of him. But he says such strange things to me; and I would not purposely have gone out to meet him. He came to us in the fields, and then we returned up the lane to the brewery, and there we left the girls. As I went through the churchyard he came there too, and then the sun was setting, and he stopped me to look at it; I did stop with him, – for a few moments, and I felt ashamed of myself; but how was I to help it? Mamma, if I could remember them I would tell you every word he said to me, and every look of his face. He asked me to be his friend. Mamma, if you will believe in me I will tell you everything. I will never deceive you."

She was still holding her mother's arms while she spoke. Now she held her very close and nestled in against her bosom, and gradually got her cheek against her mother's cheek, and her lips against her mother's neck. How could any mother refuse such a caress as that, or remain hard and stern against such signs of love? Mrs. Ray, at any rate, was not possessed of strength to do so. She was vanquished, and put her arm round her girl and embraced her. She spoke soft words, and told Rachel that she was her dear, dear, dearest darling. She was still awed and dismayed by the tidings which she had heard of the young man; she still thought there was some terrible danger against which it behoved them all to be on their guard. But she no longer felt herself divided from her child, and had ceased to believe in the necessity of those

terrible words which Mrs. Prime had used.

"You will believe me?" said Rachel. "You will not think that I am making up stories to deceive you?" Then the mother assured the daughter with many kisses that she would believe her.

After that they sat long into the night, discussing all that Luke Rowan had said, and the discussion certainly took place after a fashion that would not have been considered satisfactory by Mrs. Prime had she heard it. Mrs. Ray was soon led into talking about Mr. Rowan as though he were not a wolf, – as though he might possibly be neither a wolf ravenous with his native wolfish fur and open wolfish greed; or, worse than that, a wolf, more ravenous still, in sheep's clothing. There was no word spoken of him as a lover; but Rachel told her mother that the man had called her by her Christian name, and Mrs. Ray had fully understood the sign. "My darling, you mustn't let him do that." "No, mamma; I won't. But he went on talking so fast that I had not time to stop him, and after that it was not worth while." The project of the party was also told to Mrs. Ray, and Rachel, sitting now with her head upon her mother's lap, owned that she would like to go to it. "Parties are not always wicked, mamma," she said. To this assertion Mrs. Ray expressed an undecided assent, but intimated her decided belief that very many parties were wicked. "There will be dancing, and I do not like that," said Mrs. Ray. "Yet I was taught dancing at school," said Rachel. When the matter had gone so far as this it must be acknowledged that Rachel had done much towards securing her share of mastery over her mother.

"He will be there, of course," said Mrs. Ray. "Oh, yes; he will be there," said Rachel. "But why should I be afraid of him? Why should I live as though I were afraid to meet him? Dolly thinks that I should be shut up close, to be taken care of; but you do not think of me like that. If I was minded to be bad, shutting me up would not keep me from it." Such arguments as these from Rachel's mouth sounded, at first, very terrible to Mrs. Ray, but yet she yielded to them.

On the next morning Rachel was down first, and was found by her sister fast engaged on the usual work of the house, as though nothing out of the way had occurred on the previous evening. "Good morning, Dolly," she said, and then went on arranging the things on the breakfast-table. "Good morning, Rachel," said Mrs. Prime, still speaking like a raven. There was not a word said between them about the young man or the churchyard, and at nine o'clock Mrs. Ray came down to them, dressed ready for church. They seated themselves and ate their breakfast together, and still not a word was said.

It was Mrs. Prime's custom to go to morning service at one of the churches in Baslehurst; not at the old parish church which stood in the churchyard near the brewery, but at a new church which had been built as auxiliary to the other, and at which the Rev. Samuel Prong was the ministering clergyman. As we shall have occasion to know Mr. Prong it may be as well to explain here that he was not simply a curate to old Dr. Harford, the rector of Baslehurst. He had a separate district of his own, which had been

divided from the old parish, not exactly in accordance with the rector's good pleasure. Dr. Harford had held the living for more than forty years; he had held it for nearly forty years before the division had been made, and he had thought that the parish should remain a parish entire, – more especially as the presentation to the new benefice was not conceded to him. Therefore Dr. Harford did not love Mr. Prong.

But Mrs. Prime did love him, – with that sort of love which devout women bestow upon the church minister of their choice. Mr. Prong was an energetic, severe, hardworking, and, I fear, intolerant young man, who bestowed very much laudable care upon his sermons. The care and industry were laudable, but not so the pride with which he thought of them and their results. He spoke much of preaching the Gospel, and was sincere beyond all doubt in his desire to do so; but he allowed himself to be led away into a belief that his brethren in the ministry around him did not preach the Gospel, – that they were careless shepherds, or shepherds' dogs indifferent to the wolf, and in this way he had made himself unpopular among the clergy and gentry of the neighbourhood. It may well be understood that such a man coming down upon a district, cut out almost from the centre of Dr. Harford's parish, would be a thorn in the side of that old man. But Mr. Prong had his circle of friends, of very ardent friends, and among them Mrs. Prime was one of the most ardent. For the last year or two she had always attended morning service at his church, and very frequently had gone there twice in the

day, though the walk was long and tedious, taking her the whole length of the town of Baslehurst. And there had been some little uneasiness between Mrs. Ray and Mrs. Prime on the matter of this church attendance. Mrs. Prime had wished her mother and sister to have the benefit of Mr. Prong's eloquence; but Mrs. Ray, though she was weak in morals, was strong in her determination to adhere to Mr. Comfort of Cawston. It had been matter of great sorrow to her that her daughter should leave Mr. Comfort's church, and she had positively declined to be taken out of her own parish. Rachel had, of course, stuck to her mother in this controversy, and had said some sharp things about Mr. Prong. She declared that Mr. Prong had been educated at Islington, and that sometimes he forgot his "h's." When such things were said Mrs. Prime would wax very angry, and would declare that no one could be saved by the perfection of Dr. Harford's pronunciation. But there was no question as to Dr. Harford, and no justification for the introduction of his name into the dispute. Mrs. Prime, however, did not choose to say anything against Mr. Comfort, with whom her husband had been curate, and who, in her younger days, had been a light to her own feet. Mr. Comfort was by no means such a one as Dr. Harford, though the two old men were friends. Mr. Comfort had been regarded as a Calvinist when he was young, as Evangelical in middle life, and was still known as a Low Churchman in his old age. Therefore Mrs. Prime would spare him in her sneers, though she left his ministry. He had become lukewarm, but not absolutely stone cold, like the old

rector at Baslehurst. So said Mrs. Prime. Old men would become lukewarm, and therefore she could pardon Mr. Comfort. But Dr. Harford had never been warm at all, – had never been warm with the warmth which she valued. Therefore she scorned him and sneered at him. In return for which Rachel scorned Mr. Prong and sneered at him.

But though it was Mrs. Prime's custom to go to church at Baslehurst, on this special Sunday she declared her intention of accompanying her mother to Cawston. Not a word had been said about the young man, and they all started off on their walk together in silence and gloom. With such thoughts as they had in their mind it was impossible that they should make the journey pleasantly. Rachel had counted on the walk with her mother, and had determined that everything should be pleasant. She would have said a word or two about Luke Rowan, and would have gradually reconciled her mother to his name. But as it was she said nothing; and it may be feared that her mind, during the period of her worship, was not at charity with her sister. Mr. Comfort preached his half-hour as usual, and then they all walked home. Dr. Harford never exceeded twenty minutes, and had often been known to finish his discourse within ten. What might be the length of a sermon of Mr. Prong's no man or woman could foretell, but he never spared himself or his congregation much under an hour.

They all walked home gloomily to their dinner, and ate their cold mutton and potatoes in sorrow and sadness. It seemed as

though no sort of conversation was open to them. They could not talk of their usual Sunday subjects. Their minds were full of one matter, and it seemed that that matter was by common consent to be banished from their lips for the day. In the evening, after tea, the two sisters again went up to Cawston church, leaving their mother with her Bible; – but hardly a word was spoken between them, and in the same silence they sat till bed-time. To Mrs. Ray and to Rachel it had been one of the saddest, dreariest days that either of them had ever known. I doubt whether the suffering of Mrs. Prime was so great. She was kept up by the excitement of feeling that some great crisis was at hand. If Rachel were not made amenable to authority she would leave the cottage.

When Rachel had run with hurrying steps from the stile in the churchyard, she left Luke Rowan still standing there. He watched her till she crossed into the lane, and then he turned and again looked out upon the still ruddy line of the horizon. The blaze of light was gone, but there were left, high up in the heavens, those wonderful hues which tinge with softly-changing colour the edges of the clouds when the brightness of some glorious sunset has passed away. He sat himself on the wooden rail, watching till all of it should be over, and thinking, with lazy half-formed thoughts, of Rachel Ray. He did not ask himself what he meant by assuring her of his friendship, and by claiming hers, but he declared to himself that she was very lovely, – more lovely than beautiful, and then smiled inwardly at the prettiness of her perturbed spirit. He remembered well that he had called her

Rachel, and that she had allowed his doing so to pass by without notice; but he understood also how and why she had done so. He knew that she had been flurried, and that she had skipped the thing because she had not known the moment at which to make her stand. He gave himself credit for no undue triumph, nor her discredit for any undue easiness. "What a woman she is!" he said to himself; "so womanly in everything." Then his mind rambled away to other subjects, possibly to the practicability of making good beer instead of bad.

He was a young man, by no means of a bad sort, meaning to do well, with high hopes in life, one who had never wronged a woman, or been untrue to a friend, full of energy and hope and pride. But he was conceited, prone to sarcasm, sometimes cynical, and perhaps sometimes affected. It may be that he was not altogether devoid of that Byronic weakness which was so much more prevalent among young men twenty years since than it is now. His two trades had been those of an attorney and a brewer, and yet he dabbled in romance, and probably wrote poetry in his bedroom. Nevertheless, there were worse young men about Baslehurst than Luke Rowan.

"And now for Mr. Tappitt," said he, as he slowly took his legs from off the railing.

CHAPTER V.
MR. COMFORT GIVES HIS ADVICE

Mrs. Tappitt was very full of her party. It had grown in her mind as those things do grow, till it had come to assume almost the dimensions of a ball. When Mrs. Tappitt first consulted her husband and obtained his permission for the gathering, it was simply intended that a few of her daughters' friends should be brought together to make the visit cheerful for Miss Rowan; but the mistress of the house had become ambitious; two fiddles, with a German horn, were to be introduced because the piano would be troublesome; the drawing-room carpet was to be taken up, and there was to be a supper in the dining-room. The thing in its altered shape loomed large by degrees upon Mr. Tappitt, and he found himself unable to stop its growth. The word ball would have been fatal; but Mrs. Tappitt was too good a general, and the girls were too judicious as lieutenants, to commit themselves by the presumption of any such term. It was still Mrs. Tappitt's evening tea-party, but it was understood in Baslehurst that Mrs. Tappitt's evening tea-party was to be something considerable.

A great success had attended this lady at the onset of her scheme. Mrs. Butler Cornbury had called at the brewery, and had promised that she would come, and that she would bring some of the Cornbury family. Now Mr. Butler Cornbury was the eldest son of the most puissant squire within five miles of

Baslehurst, and was indeed almost as good as Squire himself, his father being a very old man. Mrs. Butler Cornbury had, it is true, not been esteemed as holding any very high rank while shining as a beauty under the name of Patty Comfort; but she had taken kindly to her new honours, and was now reckoned as a considerable magnate in that part of the county. She did not customarily join in the festivities of the town, and held herself aloof from people even of higher standing than the Tappitts. But she was an ambitious woman, and had inspired her lord with the desire of representing Baslehurst in Parliament. There would be an election at Baslehurst in the coming autumn, and Mrs. Cornbury was already preparing for the fight. Hence had arisen her visit at the brewery, and hence also her ready acquiescence in Mrs. Tappitt's half-pronounced request.

The party was to be celebrated on a Tuesday, – Tuesday week after that Sunday which was passed so uncomfortably at Bragg's End; and on the Monday Mrs. Tappitt and her daughters sat conning over the list of their expected guests, and preparing their invitations. It must be understood that the Rowan family had somewhat grown upon them in estimation since Luke had been living with them. They had not known much of him till he came among them, and had been prepared to patronise him; but they found him a young man not to be patronised by any means, and imperceptibly they learned to feel that his mother and sister would have to be esteemed by them rather as great ladies. Luke was in nowise given to boasting, and had no intention

of magnifying his mother and sister; but things had been said which made the Tappitts feel that Mrs. Rowan must have the best bedroom, and that Mary Rowan must be provided with the best partners.

"And what shall we do about Rachel Ray?" said Martha, who was sitting with the list before her. Augusta, who was leaning over her sister, puckered up her mouth and said nothing. She had watched from the house door on that Saturday evening, and had been perfectly aware that Luke Rowan had taken Rachel off towards the stile under the trees. She could not bring herself to say anything against Rachel, but she certainly wished that she might be excluded.

"Of course she must be asked," said Cherry. Cherry was sitting opposite to the other girls writing on a lot of envelopes the addresses of the notes which were afterwards to be prepared. "We told her we should ask her." And as she spoke she addressed a cover to "Miss Ray, Bragg's End Cottage, Cawston."

"Stop a moment, my dear," said Mrs. Tappitt from the corner of the sofa on which she was sitting. "Put that aside, Cherry. Rachel Ray is all very well, but considering all things I am not sure that she will quite do for Tuesday night. It's not quite in her line, I think."

"But we have mentioned it to her already, mamma," said Martha.

"Of course we did," said Cherry. "It would be the meanest thing in the world not to ask her now!"

"I am not at all sure that Mrs. Rowan would like it," said Mrs. Tappitt.

"And I don't think that Rachel is quite up to what Mary has been used to," said Augusta.

"If she has half a mind to flirt with Luke already," said Mrs. Tappitt, "I ought not to encourage it."

"That is such nonsense, mamma," said Cherry. "If he likes her he'll find her somewhere if he doesn't find her here."

"My dear, you shouldn't say that what I say is nonsense," said Mrs. Tappitt.

"But, mamma, when we have already asked her! – Besides, she is a lady," said Cherry.

"I can't say that I think Mrs. Butler Cornbury would wish to meet her," said Mrs. Tappitt.

"Mrs. Butler Cornbury's father is their particular friend," said Martha. "Mrs. Ray always goes to Mr. Comfort's parties."

In this way the matter was discussed, and at last Cherry's eagerness and Martha's sense of justice carried the day. The envelope which Cherry had addressed was brought into use, and the note to Rachel was deposited in the post with all those other notes, the destination of which was too far to be reached by the brewery boy without detrimental interference with the brewery work. We will continue our story by following the note which was delivered by the Cawston postman at Bragg's End about seven o'clock on the Tuesday morning. It was delivered into Rachel's own hand, and read by her as she stood by the kitchen

dresser before either her mother or Mrs. Prime had come down from their rooms. There still was sadness and gloom at Bragg's End. During all the Monday there had been no comfort in the house, and Rachel had continued to share her mother's bedroom. At intervals, when Rachel had been away, much had been said between Mrs. Ray and Mrs. Prime; but no conclusion had been reached; no line of conduct had received their joint adhesion; and the threat remained that Mrs. Prime would leave the cottage. Mrs. Ray, while listening to her elder daughter's words, still continued to fear that evil spirits were hovering around them; but yet she would not consent to order Rachel to become a devout attendant at the Dorcas meetings. Monday had not been a Dorcas day, and therefore it had been very dull and very tedious.

Rachel stood a while with the note in her hand, fearing that the contest must be brought on again and fought out to an end before she could send her answer to it. She had told her mother that she was to be invited, and Mrs. Ray had lacked the courage at the moment which would have been necessary for an absolute and immediate rejection of the proposition. If Mrs. Prime had not been with them in the house, Rachel little doubted but that she might have gone to the party. If Mrs. Prime had not been there, Rachel, as she was now gradually becoming aware, might have had her own way almost in everything. Without the support which Mrs. Prime gave her, Mrs. Ray would have gradually slid down from that stern code of morals which she had been induced to adopt by the teaching of those around her, and would have

entered upon a new school of teaching under Rachel's tutelage. But Mrs. Prime was still there, and Rachel herself was not inclined to fight, if fighting could be avoided. So she put the note into her pocket, and neither answered it or spoke of it till Mrs. Prime had started on her after-dinner walk into Baslehurst. Then she brought it forth and read it to her mother. "I suppose I ought to answer it by the post this evening, mamma?"

"Oh, dear, this evening! that's very short."

"It can be put off till to-morrow if there's any good in putting it off," said Rachel. Mrs. Ray seemed to think that there might be good in putting it off, or rather that there would be harm in doing it at once.

"Do you particularly want to go, my dear?" Mrs. Ray said, after a pause.

"Yes, mamma; I should like to go." Then Mrs. Ray uttered a little sound which betokened uneasiness, and was again silent for a while.

"I can't understand why you want to go to this place, – so particularly. You never used to care about such things. You know your sister won't like it, and I'm not at all sure that you ought to go."

"I'll tell you why I wish it particularly, only – "

"Well, my dear."

"I don't know whether I can make you understand just what I mean."

"If you tell me, I shall understand, I suppose."

Rachel considered her words for a moment or two before she spoke, and then she endeavoured to explain herself. "It isn't that I care for this party especially, mamma, though I own that, after what the girls have said, I should like to be there; but I feel – "

"You feel what, my dear?"

"It is this, mamma. Dolly and I do not agree about these things, and I don't intend to let her manage me just in the way she thinks right."

"Oh, Rachel!"

"Well, mamma, would you wish it? If you could tell me that you really think it wrong to go to parties, I would give them up. Indeed it wouldn't be very much to give up, for I don't often get the chance. But you don't say so. You only say that I had better not go, because Dolly doesn't like it. Now, I won't be ruled by her. Don't look at me in that way, mamma. Is it right that I should be?"

"You have heard what she says about going away."

"I shall be very sorry if she goes, and I hope she won't; but I can't think that her threatening you in that way ought to make any difference. And – I'll tell you more; I do particularly wish to go to Mrs. Tappitt's, because of all that Dolly has said about, – about Mr. Rowan. I wish to show her and you that I am not afraid to meet him. Why should I be afraid of any one?"

"You should be afraid of doing wrong."

"Yes; and if it were wrong to meet any other young man I ought not to go; but there is nothing specially wrong in my

meeting him. She has said very unkind things about it, and I intend that she shall know that I will not notice them." As Rachel spoke Mrs. Ray looked up at her, and was surprised by the expression of unrelenting purpose which she saw there. There had come over her face that motion in her eyes and that arching of her brows which Mrs. Ray had seen before, but which hitherto she had hardly construed into their true meaning. Now she was beginning to construe these signs aright, and to understand that there would be difficulty in managing her little family.

The conversation ended in an undertaking on Rachel's part that she would not answer the note till the following day. "Of course that means," said Rachel, "that I am to answer it just as Dolly thinks fit." But she repented of these words as soon as they were spoken, and repented of them almost in ashes when her mother declared, with tears in her eyes, that it was not her intention to be guided by Dorothea in this matter. "You ought not to say such things as that, Rachel," she said. "No, mamma, I ought not; for there is no one so good as you are; and if you'll say that you think I ought not to go, I'll write to Cherry, and explain it to her at once. I don't care a bit about the party, – as far as the party is concerned." But Mrs. Ray would not now pronounce any injunction on the matter. She had made up her mind as to what she would do. She would call upon Mr. Comfort at the parsonage, explain the whole thing to him, and be guided altogether by his counsel.

Not a word was said in the cottage about the invitation when

Mrs. Prime came back in the evening, nor was a word said on the following morning. Mrs. Ray had declared her intention of going up to the parsonage, and neither of her daughters had asked her why she was going. Rachel had no need to ask, for she well understood her mother's purpose. As to Mrs. Prime, she was in these days black and full of gloom, asking but few questions, watching the progress of events with the eyes of an evil-singing prophetess, but keeping back her words till the moment should come in which she would be driven by her inner impulses to speak them forth with terrible strength. When the breakfast was over, Mrs. Ray took her bonnet and started forth to the parsonage.

I do not know that a widow, circumstanced as was Mrs. Ray, could do better than go to her clergyman for advice, but nevertheless, when she got to Mr. Comfort's gate she felt that the task of explaining her purpose would not be without difficulty. It would be necessary to tell everything; how Rachel had become suddenly an object of interest to Mr. Luke Rowan, how Dorothea suspected terrible things, and how Rachel was anxious for the world's vanities. The more she thought over it, the more sure she felt that Mr. Comfort would put an embargo upon the party. It seemed but yesterday that he had been telling her, with all his pulpit unction, that the pleasures of this world should never be allowed to creep near the heart. With doubting feet and doubting heart she walked up to the parsonage door, and almost immediately found herself in the presence of her husband's old

friend.

Whatever faults there might be in Mr. Comfort's character, he was at any rate good-natured and patient. That he was sincere, too, no one who knew him well had ever doubted, – sincere, that is, as far as his intentions went. When he endeavoured to teach his flock that they should despise money, he thought that he despised it himself. When he told the little children that this world should be as nothing to them, he did not remember that he himself enjoyed keenly the good things of this world. If he had a fault it was perhaps this, – that he was a hard man at a bargain. He liked to have all his temporalities, and make them go as far as they could be stretched. There was the less excuse for this, seeing that his children were well, and even richly, settled in life, and that his wife, should she ever be left a widow, would have ample provision for her few remaining years. He had given his daughter a considerable fortune, without which perhaps the Cornbury Grange people would not have welcomed her so kindly as they had done, and now, as he was still growing rich, it was supposed that he would leave her more.

He listened to Mrs. Ray with the greatest attention, having first begged her to recruit her strength with a glass of wine. As she continued to tell her story he interrupted her from time to time with good-natured little words, and then, when she had done, he asked after Luke Rowan's worldly means. "The young man has got something, I suppose," said he.

"Got something!" repeated Mrs. Ray, not exactly catching his

meaning.

"He has some share in the brewery, hasn't he?"

"I believe he has, or is to have. So Rachel told me."

"Yes, – yes; I've heard of him before. If Tappitt doesn't take him into the concern he'll have to give him a very serious bit of money. There's no doubt about the young man having means. Well, Mrs. Ray, I don't suppose Rachel could do better than take him."

"Take him!"

"Yes, – why not? Between you and me, Rachel is growing into a very handsome girl, – a very handsome girl indeed. I'd no idea she'd be so tall, and carry herself so well."

"Oh, Mr. Comfort, good looks are very dangerous for a young woman."

"Well, yes; indeed they are. But still, you know, handsome girls very often do very well; and if this young man fancies Miss Rachel – "

"But, Mr. Comfort, there hasn't been anything of that. I don't suppose he has ever thought of it, and I'm sure she hasn't."

"But young people get to think of it. I shouldn't be disposed to prevent their coming together in a proper sort of way. I don't like night walkings in churchyards, certainly, but I really think that was only an accident."

"I'm sure Rachel didn't mean it."

"I'm quite sure she didn't mean anything improper. And as for him, if he admires her, it was natural enough that he should go

after her. If you ask my advice, Mrs. Ray, I should just tell her to be cautious, but I shouldn't be especially careful to separate them. Marriage is the happiest condition for a young woman, and for a young man, too. And how are young people to get married if they are not allowed to see each other?"

"And about the party, Mr. Comfort?"

"Oh, let her go; there'll be no harm. And I'll tell you what, Mrs. Ray; my daughter, Mrs. Cornbury, is going from here, and she shall pick her up and bring her home. It's always well for a young girl to go with a married woman." Then Mrs. Ray did take her glass of sherry, and walked back to Bragg's End, wondering a good deal, and not altogether at ease in her mind as to that great question, – what line of moral conduct might best befit a devout Christian.

Something also had been said at the interview about Mrs. Prime. Mrs. Ray had intimated that Mrs. Prime would separate herself from her mother and her sister unless her views were allowed to prevail in this question regarding the young man from the brewery. But Mr. Comfort, in what few words he had said on this part of the subject, had shown no consideration whatever for Mrs. Prime. "Then she'll behave very wickedly," he had said. "But I'm afraid Mrs. Prime has learned to think too much of her own opinion lately. If that's what she has got by going to Mr. Prong she had better have remained in her own parish." After that, nothing more was said about Mrs. Prime.

"Oh, let her go; there'll be no harm." That had been Mr.

Comfort's dictum about the evening party. Such as it was, Mrs. Ray felt herself bound to be guided by it. She had told Rachel that she would ask the clergyman's advice, and take it, whatever it might be. Nevertheless she did not find herself to be easy as she walked home. Mr. Comfort's latter teachings tended to upset all the convictions of her life. According to his teaching, as uttered in the sanctum of his own study, young men were not to be regarded as ravening wolves. And that meeting in the churchyard, which had utterly overwhelmed Dorothea by the weight of its iniquity, and which even to her had been very terrible, was a mere nothing; – a venial accident on Rachel's part, and the most natural proceeding in the world on the part of Luke Rowan! That it was natural enough for a wolf Mrs. Ray could understand; but she was now told that the lamb might go out and meet the wolf without any danger! And then those questions about Rowan's share in the brewery, and Mr. Comfort's ready assertion that the young wolf, – man or wolf, as the case might be, – was well to do in the world! In fact Mrs. Ray's interview with her clergyman had not gone exactly as she had expected, and she was bewildered; and the path into evil, – if it was a path into evil, – was made so easy and pleasant! Mrs. Ray had already considered the difficult question of Rachel's journey to the party, and journey home again; but provision was now made for all that in a way that was indeed very comfortable, but which might make Rachel very vain. She was to be ushered into Mrs. Tappitt's drawing-room under the wing of the most august lady of the neighbourhood.

After that, for the remaining half-hour of her walk home, Mrs. Ray gave her mind up to the consideration of what dress Rachel should wear.

When Mrs. Ray reached her own gate, Rachel was in the garden waiting for her. "Well, mamma?" she said. "Is Dorothea at home?" Mrs. Ray asked; and on being informed that Dorothea was at work within, she desired Rachel to follow her up to her bedroom. When there she told her budget of news, – not stinting her child of the gratification which it was sure to give. She said nothing about Luke Rowan and his means, keeping that portion of Mr. Comfort's recommendation to herself; but she declared it out as a fact, that Rachel was to accept the invitation, and to be carried to the party by Mrs. Butler Cornbury. "Oh, mamma! Dear mamma!" said Rachel, who was leaning against the side of the bed. Then she gave a long sigh, and a bright colour came over her face, – almost as though she were blushing. But she said no more at the moment, but allowed her mind to run off and revel in its own thoughts. She had indeed longed to go to this party, though she had taught herself to believe that she could bear being told that she was not to go without disappointment. "And now we must let Dorothea know," said Mrs. Ray. "Yes, – we must let her know," said Rachel; but her mind was away, straying, I fear, under the churchyard elms with Luke Rowan, and looking at the arm amidst the clouds. He had said that it was stretched out as though to take her; and she had never shaken off from her imagination the idea that it was his arm on which she had been

bidden to look, – the arm which had afterwards held her when she strove to go.

It was tea-time before courage was mustered for telling the facts to Mrs. Prime. Mrs. Prime, after dinner, had gone into Baslehurst; but the meeting at Miss Pucker's had not been a regular full gathering, and Mrs. Prime had come back to tea. There was no hot toast, and no clotted cream. It may appear selfish on the part of Mrs. Ray and Rachel that they should have kept such good things for their only little private banquets, but, in truth, such delicacies did not suit Mrs. Prime. Nice things aggravated her spirits and made her fretful. She liked the tea to be stringy and bitter, and she liked the bread to be stale; – as she preferred also that her weeds should be battered and old. She was approaching that stage of discipline at which ashes become pleasant eating, and sackcloth is grateful to the skin. The self-indulgences of the saints in this respect often exceed anything that is done by the sinners.

"Dorothea," said Mrs. Ray, and she looked down upon the dark dingy fluid in her cup as she spoke, "I have been up to Mr. Comfort's to-day."

"Yes; I heard you say you were going there."

"I went to ask him for advice."

"Oh."

"As I was in much doubt, I thought it right to go to the clergyman of my parish."

"I don't think much about parishes myself. Mr. Comfort is an

old man now, and I fear he does not give himself up to the Gospel as he used to do. If people were called upon to bind themselves down to parishes, what would those poor creatures do who have over them such a pastor as Dr. Harford?"

"Dr. Harford is a very good man, I believe," said Rachel, "and he keeps two curates."

"I'm afraid, Rachel, you know but little about it. He does keep two curates, – but what are they? They go to cricket-matches, and among young women with bows and arrows! If you had really wanted advice, mamma, I would sooner have heard that you had gone to Mr. Prong."

"But I didn't go to Mr. Prong, my dear; – and I don't mean. Mr. Prong is all very well, I dare say, but I've known Mr. Comfort for nearly thirty years, and I don't like sudden changes." Then Mrs. Ray stirred her tea with rather a quick motion of her hand. Rachel said not a word, but her mother's sharp speech and spirited manner was very pleasant to her. She was quite contented now that Mr. Comfort should be regarded as the family counsellor. She remembered how well she had loved Mr. Comfort always, and thought of days when Patty Comfort had been very good-natured to her as a child.

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Prime. "Of course, mamma, you must judge for yourself."

"Yes, my dear, I must; or rather, as I didn't wish to trust my own judgment, I went to Mr. Comfort for advice. He says that he sees no harm in Rachel going to this party."

"Party! what party?" almost screamed Mrs. Prime. Mrs. Ray had forgotten that nothing had as yet been said to Dorothea about the invitation.

"Mrs. Tappitt is going to give a party at the brewery," said Rachel, in her very softest voice, "and she has asked me."

"And you are going? You mean to let her go?" Mrs. Prime had asked two questions, and she received two answers. "Yes," said Rachel; "I suppose I shall go, as mamma says so." "Mr. Comfort says there is no harm in it," said Mrs. Ray; "and Mrs. Butler Cornbury is to come from the parsonage to take her up." All question as to Dorcas discipline to be inflicted daily upon Rachel on account of that sin of which she had been guilty in standing under the elms with a young man was utterly lost in this terrible proposition! Instead of being sent to Miss Pucker in her oldest merino dress, Rachel was to be decked in muslin and finery, and sent out to a dancing party at which this young man was to be the hero! It was altogether too much for Dorothea Prime. She slowly wiped the crumbs from off her dingy crape, and with creaking noise pushed back her chair. "Mother," she said, "I couldn't have believed it! I could not have believed it!" Then she withdrew to her own chamber.

Mrs. Ray was much afflicted; but not the less did Rachel look out for the returning postman, on his road into Baslehurst, that she might send her little note to Mrs. Tappitt, signifying her acceptance of that lady's kind invitation.

CHAPTER VI.
PREPARATIONS FOR MRS. TAPPITT'S PARTY

I am disposed to think that Mrs. Butler Cornbury did Mrs. Tappitt an injury when she with so much ready goodnature accepted the invitation for the party, and that Mrs. Tappitt was aware of this before the night of the party arrived. She was put on her mettle in a way that was disagreeable to her, and forced into an amount of submissive supplication to Mr. Tappitt for funds, which was vexatious to her spirit. Mrs. Tappitt was a good wife, who never ran her husband into debt, and kept nothing secret from him in the management of her household, – nothing at least which it behoved him to know. But she understood the privileges of her position, and could it have been possible for her to have carried through this party without extra household moneys, or without any violent departure from her usual customs of life, she could have snubbed her husband's objections comfortably, and have put him into the background for the occasion without any inconvenience to herself or power of remonstrance from him. But when Mrs. Butler Cornbury had been gracious, and when the fiddles and horn had become a fact to be accomplished, when Mrs. Rowan and Mary began to loom large on her imagination and a regular supper was projected, then Mrs. Tappitt felt the

necessity of superior aid, and found herself called upon to reconcile her lord.

And this work was the more difficult and the more disagreeable to her feelings because she had already pooh-poohed her husband when he asked a question about the party. "Just a few friends got together by the girls," she had said. "Leave it all to them, my dear. It's not very often they see anybody at home."

"I believe I see my friends as often as most people in Baslehurst," Mr. Tappitt had replied indignantly, "and I suppose my friends are their friends." So there had been a little soreness which made the lady's submission the more disagreeable to her.

"Butler Cornbury! He's a puppy. I don't want to see him, and what's more, I won't vote for him."

"You need not tell her so, my dear; and he's not coming. I suppose you like your girls to hold their heads up in the place; and if they show that they've respectable people with them at home, respectable people will be glad to notice them."

"Respectable! If our girls are to be made respectable by giving grand dances, I'd rather not have them respectable. How much is the whole thing to cost?"

"Well, very little, T.; not much more than one of your Christmas dinner-parties. There'll be just the music, and the lights, and a bit of something to eat. What people drink at such times comes to nothing, – just a little negus and lemonade. We might possibly have a bottle or two of champagne at the supper-

table, for the look of the thing."

"Champagne!" exclaimed the brewer. He had never yet incurred the cost of a bottle of champagne within his own house, though he thought nothing of it at public dinners. The idea was too much for him; and Mrs. Tappitt, feeling how the ground lay, gave that up, – at any rate for the present. She gave up the champagne; but in abandoning that, she obtained the marital sanction, a quasi sanction which he was too honourable as a husband afterwards to repudiate, for the music and the eatables. Mrs. Tappitt knew that she had done well, and prepared for his dinner that day a beef-steak pie, made with her own hands. Tappitt was not altogether a dull man, and understood these little signs. "Ah," said he, "I wonder how much that pie is to cost me?"

"Oh, T., how can you say such things! As if you didn't have beef-steak pie as often as it's good for you." The pie, however, had its effect, as also did the exceeding "boilishness" of the water which was brought in for his gin-toddy that night; and it was known throughout the establishment that papa was in a good humour, and that mamma had been very clever.

"The girls must have had new dresses anyway before the month was out," Mrs. Tappitt said to her husband the next morning before he had left the conjugal chamber.

"Do you mean to say that they're to have gowns made on purpose for this party?" said the brewer; and it seemed by the tone of his voice that the hot gin and water had lost its kindly effects.

"My dear, they must be dressed, you know. I'm sure no girls in Baslehurst cost less in the way of finery. In the ordinary way they'd have had new frocks almost immediately."

"Bother!" Mr. Tappitt was shaving just at this moment, and dashed aside his razor for a moment to utter this one word. He intended to signify how perfectly well he was aware that a muslin frock prepared for an evening party would not fill the place of a substantial morning dress.

"Well, my dear, I'm sure the girls ain't unreasonable; nor am I. Five-and-thirty shillings apiece for them would do it all. And I shan't want anything myself this year in September." Now Mr. Tappitt, who was a man of sentiment, always gave his wife some costly article of raiment on the 1st of September, calling her his partridge and his bird, – for on that day they had been married. Mrs. Tappitt had frequently offered to intromit the ceremony when calling upon his generosity for other purposes, but the September gift had always been forthcoming.

"Will thirty-five shillings a-piece do it?" said he, turning round with his face all covered with lather. Then again he went to work with his razor just under his right ear.

"Well, yes; I think it will. Two pounds each for the three shall do it anyway."

Mr. Tappitt gave a little jump at this increased demand for fifteen shillings, and not being in a good position for jumping, encountered an unpleasant accident, and uttered a somewhat vehement exclamation. "There," said he, "now I've cut myself,

and it's your fault. Oh dear; oh dear! When I cut myself there it never stops. It's no good doing that, Margaret; it only makes it worse. There; now you've got the soap and blood all down inside my shirt."

Mrs. Tappitt on this occasion was subjected to some trouble, for the wound on Mr. Tappitt's cheek-bone declined to be stanched at once; but she gained her object, and got the dresses for her daughters. It was not taken by them as a drawback on their happiness that they had to make the dresses themselves, for they were accustomed to such work; but this necessity joined to all other preparations for the party made them very busy. Till twelve at night on three evenings they sat with their smart new things in their laps and their needles in their hands; but they did not begrudge this, as Mrs. Butler Cornbury was coming to the brewery. They were very anxious to get the heavy part of the work done before the Rowans should arrive, doubting whether they would become sufficiently intimate with Mary to tell her all their little domestic secrets, and do their work in the presence of their new friend during the first day of her sojourn in the house. So they toiled like slaves on the Wednesday and Thursday in order that they might walk about like ladies on the Friday and Saturday.

But the list of their guests gave them more trouble than aught else. Whom should they get to meet Mrs. Butler Cornbury? At one time Mrs. Tappitt had proposed to word certain of her invitations with a special view to this end. Had her idea been

carried out people who might not otherwise have come were to be tempted by a notification that they were especially asked to meet Mrs. Butler Cornbury. But Martha had said that this she thought would not do for a dance. "People do do it, my dear," Mrs. Tappitt had pleaded.

"Not for dancing, mamma," said Martha. "Besides, she would be sure to hear of it, and perhaps she might not like it."

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Tappitt. "It would show that we appreciated her kindness." The plan, however, was abandoned.

Of the Baslehurst folk there were so few that were fitted to meet Mrs. Butler Cornbury! There was old Miss Harford, the rector's daughter. She was fit to meet anybody in the county, and, as she was good-natured, might probably come. But she was an old maid, and was never very bright in her attire. "Perhaps Captain Gordon's lady would come," Mrs. Tappitt suggested. But at this proposition all the girls shook their heads. Captain Gordon had lately taken a villa close to Baslehurst, but had shown himself averse to any intercourse with the townspeople. Mrs. Tappitt had called on his "lady," and the call had not even been returned, a card having been sent by post in an envelope.

"It would be no good, mamma," said Martha, "and she would only make us uncomfortable if she did come."

"She is always awfully stuck up in church," said Augusta.

"And her nose is red at the end," said Cherry.

Therefore no invitation was sent to Captain Gordon's house.

"If we could only get the Fawcetts," said Augusta. The

Fawcetts were a large family living in the centre of Baslehurst, in which there were four daughters, all noted for dancing, and noted also for being the merriest, nicest, and most popular girls in Devonshire. There was a fat good-natured mother, and a thin good-natured father who had once been a banker at Exeter. Everybody desired to know the Fawcetts, and they were the especial favourites of Mrs. Butler Cornbury. But then Mrs. Fawcett did not visit Mrs. Tappitt. The girls and the mothers had a bowing acquaintance, and were always very gracious to each other. Old Fawcett and old Tappitt saw each other in town daily, and knew each other as well as they knew the cross in the butter-market; but none of the two families ever went into each other's houses. It had been tacitly admitted among them that the Fawcetts were above the Tappitts, and so the matter had rested. But now, if anything could be done? "Mrs. Butler Cornbury is all very well, of course," said Augusta, "but it would be so nice for Mary Rowan to see the Miss Fawcetts dancing here."

Martha shook her head, but at last she did write a note in the mothers name. "My girls are having a little dance, to welcome a friend from London, and they would feel so much obliged if your young ladies would come. Mrs. Butler Cornbury has been kind enough to say that she would join us, &c., &c., &c." Mrs. Tappitt and Augusta were in a seventh heaven of happiness when Mrs. Fawcett wrote to say that three of her girls would be delighted to accept the invitation; and even the discreet Martha and the less ambitious Cherry were well pleased.

"I declare I think we've been very fortunate," said Mrs. Tappitt.

"Only the Miss Fawcetts will get all the best partners," said Cherry.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Augusta, holding up her head.

But there had been yet another trouble. It was difficult for them to get people proper to meet Mrs. Butler Cornbury; but what must they do as to those people who must come and who were by no means proper to meet her? There were the Griggses for instance, who lived out of town in a wonderfully red brick house, the family of a retired Baslehurst grocer. They had been asked before Mrs. Cornbury's call had been made, or, I fear, their chance of coming to the party would have been small. There was one young Griggs, a man very terrible in his vulgarity, loud, rampant, conspicuous with villainous jewellery, and odious with the worst abominations of perfumery. He was loathsome even to the Tappitt girls; but then the Griggses and the Tappitts had known each other for half a century, and among their ordinary acquaintances Adolphus Griggs might have been endured. But what should they do when he asked to be introduced to Josceline Fawcett? Of all men he was the most unconscious of his own defects. He had once shown some symptoms of admiration for Cherry, by whom he was hated with an intensity of dislike that had amounted to a passion. She had begged that he might be omitted from the list; but Mrs. Tappitt had been afraid of angering their father.

The Rules also would be much in the way. Old Joshua Rule was a maltster, living in Cawston, and his wife and daughter had been asked before the accession of the Butler Cornbury dignity. Old Rule had supplied the brewery with malt almost ever since it had been a brewery; and no more harmless people than Mrs. Rule and her daughter existed in the neighbourhood; – but they were close neighbours of the Comforts, of Mrs. Cornbury's father and mother, and Mr. Comfort would have as soon asked his sexton to dine with him as the Rules. The Rules never expected such a thing, and therefore lived on very good terms with the clergyman. "I'm afraid she won't like meeting Mrs. Rule," Augusta had said to her mother; and then the mother had shaken her head.

Early in the week, before Rachel had accepted the invitation, Cherry had written to her friend. "Of course you'll come," Cherry had said; "and as you may have some difficulty in getting here and home again, I'll ask old Mrs. Rule to call for you. I know she'll have a place in the fly, and she's very good-natured." In answer to this Rachel had written a separate note to Cherry, telling her friend in the least boastful words which she could use that provision had been already made for her coming and going. "Mamma was up at Mr. Comfort's yesterday," Rachel wrote, "and he was so kind as to say that Mrs. Butler Cornbury would take me and bring me back. I am very much obliged to you all the same, and to Mrs. Rule."

"What do you think?" said Cherry, who had received her note in the midst of one of the family conferences; "Augusta said that

Mrs. Butler Cornbury would not like to meet Rachel Ray; but she is going to bring her in her own carriage."

"I never said anything of the kind," said Augusta.

"Oh, but you did, Augusta; or mamma did, or somebody. How nice for Rachel to be chaperoned by Mrs. Butler Cornbury!"

"I wonder what she'll wear," said Mrs. Tappitt, who had on that morning achieved her victory over the wounded brewer in the matter of the three dresses.

On the Friday morning Mrs. Rowan came with her daughter, Luke having met them at Exeter on the Thursday. Mrs. Rowan was a somewhat stately lady, slow in her movements and careful in her speech, so that the girls were at first very glad that they had valiantly worked up their finery before her coming. But Mary was by no means stately; she was younger than them, very willing to be pleased, with pleasant round eager eyes, and a kindly voice. Before she had been three hours in the house Cherry had claimed Mary for her own, had told her all about the party, all about the dresses, all about Mrs. Butler Cornbury and the Miss Fawcetts, and a word or two also about Rachel Ray. "I can tell you somebody that's almost in love with her." "You don't mean Luke?" said Mary. "Yes, but I do," said Cherry; "but of course I'm only in fun." On the Saturday Mary was hard at work herself assisting in the decoration of the drawing-room, and before the all-important Tuesday came even Mrs. Rowan and Mrs. Tappitt were confidential. Mrs. Rowan perceived at once that Mrs. Tappitt was provincial, – as she told her son, but she

was a good motherly woman, and on the whole, Mrs. Rowan condescended to be gracious to her.

At Bragg's End the preparations for the party required almost as much thought as did those at the brewery, and involved perhaps deeper care. It may be remembered that Mrs. Prime, when her ears were first astounded by that unexpected revelation, wiped the crumbs from out of her lap and walked off, wounded in spirit, to her own room. On that evening Rachel saw no more of her sister. Mrs. Ray went up to her daughter's bedroom, but stayed there only a minute or two. "What does she say?" asked Rachel, almost in a whisper. "She is very unhappy. She says that unless I can be made to think better of this she must leave the cottage. I told her what Mr. Comfort says, but she only sneers at Mr. Comfort. I'm sure I'm endeavouring to do the best I can."

"It wouldn't do, mamma, to say that she should manage everything, otherwise I'm sure I'd give up the party."

"No, my dear; I don't want you to do that, – not after what Mr. Comfort says." Mrs. Ray had in truth gone to the clergyman feeling sure that he would have given his word against the party, and that, so strengthened, she could have taken a course that would have been offensive to neither of her daughters. She had expected, too, that she would have returned home armed with such clerical thunders against the young man as would have quieted Rachel and have satisfied Dorothea. But in all this she had been, – I may hardly say disappointed, – but dismayed and bewildered by advice the very opposite to that which she had

expected. It was perplexing, but she seemed to be aware that she had no alternative now, but to fight the battle on Rachel's side. She had cut herself off from all anchorage except that given by Mr. Comfort, and therefore it behoved her to cling to that with absolute tenacity. Rachel must go to the party, even though Dorothea should carry out her threat. On that night nothing more was said about Dorothea, and Mrs. Ray allowed herself to be gradually drawn into a mild discussion about Rachel's dress.

But there was nearly a week left to them of this sort of life. Early on the following morning Mrs. Prime left the cottage, saying that she should dine with Miss Pucker, and betook herself at once to a small house in a back street of the town, behind the new church, in which lived Mr. Prong. Have I as yet said that Mr. Prong was a bachelor? Such was the fact; and there were not wanting those in Baslehurst who declared that he would amend the fault by marrying Mrs. Prime. But this rumour, if it ever reached her, had no effect upon her. The world would be nothing to her if she were to be debarred by the wickedness of loose tongues from visiting the clergyman of her choice. She went, therefore, in her present difficulty to Mr. Prong.

Mr. Samuel Prong was a little man, over thirty, with scanty, light-brown hair, with a small, rather upturned nose, with eyes by no means deficient in light and expression, but with a mean mouth. His forehead was good, and had it not been for his mouth his face would have been expressive of intellect and of some firmness. But there was about his lips an assumption of character

and dignity which his countenance and body generally failed to maintain; and there was a something in the carriage of his head and in the occasional projection of his chin, which was intended to add to his dignity, but which did, I think, only make the failure more palpable. He was a devout, good man; not self-indulgent; perhaps not more self-ambitious than it becomes a man to be; sincere, hard-working, sufficiently intelligent, true in most things to the instincts of his calling, – but deficient in one vital qualification for a clergyman of the Church of England; he was not a gentleman. May I not call it a necessary qualification for a clergyman of any church? He was not a gentleman. I do not mean to say that he was a thief or a liar; nor do I mean hereby to complain that he picked his teeth with his fork and misplaced his "h's." I am by no means prepared to define what I do mean, – thinking, however, that most men and most women will understand me. Nor do I speak of this deficiency in his clerical aptitudes as being injurious to him simply, – or even chiefly, – among folk who are themselves gentle; but that his efficiency for clerical purposes was marred altogether, among high and low, by his misfortune in this respect. It is not the owner of a good coat that sees and admires its beauty. It is not even they who have good coats themselves who recognize the article on the back of another. They who have not good coats themselves have the keenest eyes for the coats of their better-clad neighbours. As it is with coats, so it is with that which we call gentility. It is caught at a word, it is seen at a glance, it is

appreciated unconsciously at a touch by those who have none of it themselves. It is the greatest of all aids to the doctor, the lawyer, the member of Parliament, – though in that position a man may perhaps prosper without it, – and to the statesman; but to the clergyman it is a vital necessity. Now Mr. Prong was not a gentleman.

Mrs. Prime told her tale to Mr. Prong, as Mrs. Ray had told hers to Mr. Comfort. It need not be told again here. I fear that she made the most of her sister's imprudence, but she did not do so with intentional injustice. She declared her conviction that Rachel might still be made to go in a straight course, if only she could be guided by a hand sufficiently strict and armed with absolute power. Then she went on to tell Mr. Prong how Mrs. Ray had gone off to Mr. Comfort, as she herself had now come to him. It was hard, – was it not? – for poor Rachel that the story of her few minutes' whispering under the elm tree should thus be bruited about among the ecclesiastical councillors of the locality. Mr. Prong sat with patient face and with mild demeanour while the simple story of Rachel's conduct was being told; but when to this was added the iniquity of Mr. Comfort's advice, the mouth assumed the would-be grandeur, the chin came out, and to any one less infatuated than Mrs. Prime it would have been apparent that the purse was not made of silk, but that a coarser material had come to hand in the manufacture.

"What shall the sheep do," said Mr. Prong, "when the shepherd slumbers in the folds?" Then he shook his head and

puckered up his mouth.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Prime; "it is well for the sheep that there are still left a few who do not run from their work, even in the heat of the noonday sun."

Mr. Prong closed his eyes and bowed his head, and then reassumed that peculiarly disagreeable look about his mouth by which he thought to assert his dignity, intending thereby to signify that he would willingly reject the compliment as unnecessary, were he not forced to accept it as being true. He knew himself to be a shepherd who did not fear the noonday heat; but he was wrong in this, – that he suspected all other shepherds of stinting their work. It appeared to him that no sheep could nibble his grass in wholesome content, unless some shepherd were at work at him constantly with his crook. It was for the shepherd, as he thought, to know what tufts of grass were rank, and in what spots the herbage might be bitten down to the bare ground. A shepherd who would allow his flock to feed at large under his eye, merely watching his fences and folding his ewes and lambs at night, was a truant who feared the noonday sun. Such a one had Mr. Comfort become, and therefore Mr. Prong despised him in his heart. All sheep will not endure such ardent shepherding as that practised by Mr. Prong, and therefore he was driven to seek out for himself a peculiar flock. These to him were the elect of Baslehurst, and of his elect, Mrs. Prime was the most elect. Now this fault is not uncommon among young ardent clergymen.

I will not repeat the conversation that took place between the two, because they used holy words and spoke on holy subjects. In doing so they were both sincere, and not, as regarded their language, fairly subject to ridicule. In their judgment I think they were defective. He sustained Mrs. Prime in her resolution to quit the cottage unless she could induce her mother to put a stop to that great iniquity of the brewery. "The Tappitts," he said, "were worldly people, – very worldly people; utterly unfit to be the associates of the sister of his friend. As to the 'young man,' he thought that nothing further should be said at present, but that Rachel should be closely watched, – very closely watched." Mrs. Prime asked him to call upon her mother and explain his views, but he declined to do this. "He would have been most willing, – so willing! but he could not force himself where he would be unwelcome!" Mrs. Prime was, if necessary, to quit the cottage and take up her temporary residence with Miss Pucker; but Mr. Prong was inclined to think, knowing something of Mrs. Ray's customary softness of character, that if Mrs. Prime were firm, things would not be driven to such a pass as that. Mrs. Prime said that she would be firm, and she looked as though she intended to keep her word.

Mr. Prong's manner as he bade adieu to his favourite sheep was certainly of a nature to justify that rumour to which allusion has been made. He pressed Mrs. Prime's hand very closely, and invoked a blessing on her head in a warm whisper. But such signs among such people do not bear the meaning which they have in

the outer world. These people are demonstrative and unctuous, – whereas the outer world is reticent and dry. They are perhaps too free with their love, but the fault is better than that other fault of no love at all. Mr. Prong was a little free with his love, but Mrs. Prime took it all in good part, and answered him with an equal fervour. "If I can help you, dear friend," – and he still held her hand in his, – "come to me always. You never can come too often."

"You can help me, and I will come, always," she said, returning his pressure with mutual warmth. But there was no touch of earthly affection in her pressure; and if there was any in his at its close, there had, at any rate, been none at its commencement.

While Mrs. Prime was thus employed, Rachel and her mother became warm upon the subject of the dress, and when the younger widow returned home to the cottage, the elder widow was actually engaged in Baslehurst on the purchase of trappings and vanities. Her little hoard was opened, and some pretty piece of muslin was purchased by aid of which, with the needful ribbons, Rachel might be made, not fit, indeed, for Mrs. Butler Cornbury's carriage, – no such august fitness was at all contemplated by herself, – but nice and tidy, so that her presence need not be a disgrace. And it was pretty to see how Mrs. Ray revelled in these little gauds for her daughter now that the barrier of her religious awe was broken down, and that the waters of the world had made their way in upon her. She still had a feeling that she was being drowned, but she confessed that such drowning

was very pleasant. She almost felt that such drowning was good for her. At any rate it had been ordered by Mr. Comfort, and if things went astray Mr. Comfort must bear the blame. When the bright muslin was laid out on the counter before her, she looked at it with a pleased eye and touched it with a willing hand. She held the ribbon against the muslin, leaning her head on one side, and enjoyed herself. Now and again she would turn her face upon Rachel's figure, and she would almost indulge a wish that this young man might like her child in the new dress. Ah! – that was surely wicked. But if so, how wicked are most mothers in this Christian land!

The morning had gone very comfortably with them during Dorothea's absence. Mrs. Prime had hardly taken her departure before a note came from Mrs. Butler Cornbury, confirming Mr. Comfort's offer as to the carriage. "Oh, papa, what have you done?" – she had said when her father first told her. "Now I must stay there all the night, for of course she'll want to go on to the last dance!" But, like her father, she was good-natured, and therefore, though she would hardly have chosen the task, she resolved, when her first groans were over, to do it well. She wrote a kind note, saying how happy she should be, naming her hour, – and saying that Rachel should name the hour for her return.

"It will be very nice," said Rachel, rejoicing more than she should have done in thinking of the comfortable grandeur of Mrs. Butler Cornbury's carriage.

"And are you determined?" Mrs. Prime asked her mother that

evening.

"It is too late to go back now, Dorothea," said Mrs. Ray, almost crying.

"Then I cannot remain in the house," said Dorothea. "I shall go to Miss Pucker's, – but not till that morning; so that if you think better of it, all may be prevented yet."

But Mrs. Ray would not think better of it, and it was thus that the preparations were made for Mrs. Tappitt's – ball. The word "party" had now been dropped by common consent throughout Baslehurst.

CHAPTER VII.
AN ACCOUNT OF MRS. TAPPITT'S BALL – COMMENCED

Mrs. Butler Cornbury was a very pretty woman. She possessed that peculiar prettiness which is so often seen in England, and which is rarely seen anywhere else. She was bright, well-featured, with speaking lustrous eyes, with perfect complexion, and full bust, with head of glorious shape and figure like a Juno; – and yet with all her beauty she had ever about her an air of homeliness which made the sweetness of her womanhood almost more attractive than the loveliness of her personal charms. I have seen in Italy and in America women perhaps as beautiful as any that I have seen in England, but in neither country does it seem that such beauty is intended for domestic use. In Italy the beauty is soft, and of the flesh. In America it is hard, and of the mind. Here it is of the heart, I think, and as such is the happiest of the three. I do not say that Mrs. Butler Cornbury was a woman of very strong feeling; but her strongest feelings were home feelings. She was going to Mrs. Tappitt's party because it might serve her husband's purposes; she was going to burden herself with Rachel Ray because her father had asked her; and her greatest ambition was to improve the worldly position of the squires of Cornbury Grange. She was already calculating whether it might not some

day be brought about that her little Butler should sit in Parliament for his county.

At nine o'clock exactly on that much to be remembered Tuesday the Cornbury carriage stopped at the gate of the cottage at Bragg's End, and Rachel, ready dressed, blushing, nervous, but yet happy, came out, and mounting on to the step was almost fearful to take her share of the seat. "Make yourself comfortable, my dear," said Mrs. Cornbury, "you can't crush me. Or rather I always make myself crushable on such occasions as this. I suppose we are going to have a great crowd?" Rachel merely said that she didn't know. She supposed there would be a good many persons. Then she tried to thank Mrs. Cornbury for being so good to her, and of course broke down. "I'm delighted, – quite delighted," said Mrs. Cornbury. "It's so good of you to come with me. Now that I don't dance myself, there's nothing I like so much as taking out girls that do."

"And don't you dance at all?"

"I stand up for a quadrille sometimes. When a woman has five children I don't think she ought to do more than that."

"Oh, I shall not do more than that, Mrs. Cornbury."

"You mean to say you won't waltz?"

"Mamma never said anything about it, but I'm sure she would not like it. Besides – "

"Well – "

"I don't think I know how. I did learn once, when I was very little; but I've forgotten."

"It will soon come again to you if you like to try. I was very fond of waltzing before I was married." And this was the daughter of Mr. Comfort, the clergyman who preached with such strenuous eloquence against worldly vanities! Even Rachel was a little puzzled, and was almost afraid that her head was sinking beneath the waters.

There was a great fuss made when Mrs. Butler Cornbury's carriage drove up to the brewery door, and Rachel almost felt that she could have made her way up to the drawing-room more comfortably under Mrs. Rule's mild protection. All the servants seemed to rush at her, and when she found herself in the hall and was conducted into some inner room, she was not allowed to shake herself into shape without the aid of a maid-servant. Mrs. Cornbury, – who took everything as a matter of course and was ready in a minute, – had turned the maid over to the young lady with a kind idea that the young lady's toilet was more important than that of the married woman. Rachel was losing her head and knew that she was doing so. When she was again taken into the hall she hardly remembered where she was, and when Mrs. Cornbury took her by the arm and began to walk up-stairs with her, her strongest feeling was a wish that she was at home again. On the first landing, – for the dancing-room was upstairs, – they encountered Mr. Tappitt, conspicuous in a blue satin waistcoat; and on the second landing they found Mrs. Tappitt, magnificent in a green Irish poplin. "Oh, Mrs. Cornbury, we are so delighted. The Miss Fawcetts are here; they are just come. How kind of

you to bring Rachel Ray. How do you do, Rachel?" Then Mrs. Cornbury moved easily on into the drawing-room, and Rachel still found herself carried with her. She was half afraid that she ought to have slunk away from her magnificent chaperon as soon as she was conveyed safely within the house, and that she was encroaching as she thus went on; but still she could not find the moment in which to take herself off. In the drawing-room, – the room from which the carpets had been taken, – they were at once encountered by the Tappitt girls, with whom the Fawcett girls on the present occasion were so intermingled that Rachel hardly knew who was who. Mrs. Butler Cornbury was soon surrounded, and a clatter of words went on. Rachel was in the middle of the fray, and some voices were addressed also to her; but her presence of mind was gone, and she never could remember what she said on the occasion.

There had already been a dance, – the commencing operation of the night's work, – a thin quadrille, in which the early comers had taken part without much animation, and to which they had been driven up unwillingly. At its close the Fawcett girls had come in, as had now Mrs. Cornbury, so that it may be said that the evening was beginning again. What had been as yet done was but the tuning of the fiddles before the commencement of the opera. No one likes to be in at the tuning, but there are those who never are able to avoid this annoyance. As it was, Rachel, under Mrs. Cornbury's care, had been brought upon the scene just at the right moment. As soon as the great clatter had ceased, she

found herself taken by the hand by Cherry, and led a little on one side. "You must have a card, you know," said Cherry handing her a ticket on which was printed the dances as they were to succeed each other. "That first one is over. Such a dull thing. I danced with Adolphus Griggs, just because I couldn't escape him for one quadrille." Rachel took the card, but never having seen such a thing before did not in the least understand its object. "As you get engaged for the dances you must put down their names in this way, you see," – and Cherry showed her card, which already bore the designations of several cavaliers, scrawled in hieroglyphics which were intelligible to herself. "Haven't you got a pencil? Well, you can come to me. I have one hanging here, you know." Rachel was beginning to understand, and to think that she should not have very much need for the pencil, when Mrs. Cornbury returned to her, bringing a young man in her wake. "I want to introduce my cousin to you, Walter Cornbury," said she. Mrs. Cornbury was a woman who knew her duty as a chaperon, and who would not neglect it. "He waltzes delightfully," said Mrs. Cornbury, whispering, "and you needn't be afraid of being a little astray with him at first. He always does what I tell him." Then the introduction was made; but Rachel had no opportunity of repeating her fears, or of saying again that she thought she had better not waltz. What to say to Mr. Walter Cornbury she hardly knew; but before she had really said anything he had pricked her down for two dances, – for the first waltz, which was just going to begin, and some not long future quadrille. "She is very pretty,"

Mrs. Butler Cornbury had said to her cousin, "and I want to be kind to her." "I'll take her in hand and pull her through," said Walter. "What a tribe of people they've got here, haven't they?" "Yes, and you must dance with them all. Every time you stand up may be as good as a vote." "Oh," said Walter, "I'm not particular; – I'll dance as long as they keep the house open." Then he went back to Rachel, who had already been at work with Cherry's pencil.

"If there isn't Rachel Ray going to waltz with Walter Cornbury," said Augusta to her mother. Augusta had just refused the odious Griggs, and was about to stand up with a clerk in the brewery, who was almost as odious.

"It's because she came in the carriage," said Mrs. Tappitt; "but I don't think she can waltz." Then she hurried off to welcome other comers.

Rachel had hardly been left alone for a minute, and had been so much bewildered by the lights and crowd and strangeness of everything around her, that she had been unable to turn her thoughts to the one subject on which during the last week her mind had rested constantly. She had not even looked round the room for Luke Rowan. She had just seen Mary Rowan in the crowd, but had not spoken to her. She had only known her from the manner in which Cherry Tappitt had spoken to her, and it must be explained that Rachel had not seen young Rowan since that parting under the elm-trees. Indeed, since then she had seen none of the Tappitt family. Her mother had said no word to

her, cautioning her that she had better not seek them in her evening walks; but she had felt herself debarred from going into Baslehurst by all that her sister had said, and in avoiding Luke Rowan she had avoided the whole party from the brewery.

Now the room was partially cleared, the non-dancers being pressed back into a border round the walls, and the music began. Rachel, with her heart in her mouth, was claimed by her partner, and was carried forward towards the ground for dancing, tacitly assenting to her fate because she lacked words in which to explain to Mr. Cornbury how very much she would have preferred to be left in obscurity behind the wall of crinoline.

"Pray wait a minute or two," said she, almost panting.

"Oh, certainly. There's no hurry, only we'll stand where we can get our place when we like it. You need not be a bit afraid of going on with me. Patty has told me all about it, and we'll make it right in a brace of turns." There was something very good-natured in his voice, and she almost felt that she could ask him to let her sit down.

"I don't think I can," she said.

"Oh yes; come, we'll try!" Then he took her by the waist, and away they went. Twice round the room he took her, very gently, as he thought; but her head had gone from her instantly in a whirl of amazement! Of her feet and their movements she had known nothing; though she had followed the music with fair accuracy, she had done so unconsciously, and when he allowed her to stop she did not know which way she had been going, or at which end

of the room she stood. And yet she had liked it, and felt some little triumph as a conviction came upon her that she had not conspicuously disgraced herself.

"That's charming," said he. She essayed to speak a word in answer, but her want of breath did not as yet permit it.

"Charming!" he went on. "The music's perhaps a little slow, but we'll hurry them up presently." Slow! It seemed to her that she had been carried round in a vortex, of which the rapidity, though pleasant, had been almost frightful. "Come; we'll have another start," said he; and she was carried away again before she had spoken a word. "I'd no idea that girl could waltz," said Mrs. Tappitt to old Mrs. Rule. "I don't think her mother would like it if she saw it," said Mrs. Rule. "And what would Mrs. Prime say?" said Mrs. Tappitt. However the ice was broken, and Rachel, when she was given to understand that that dance was done, felt herself to be aware that the world of waltzing was open to her, at any rate for that night. Was it very wicked? She had her doubts. If anybody had suggested to her, before Mrs. Cornbury's carriage had called for her, that she would waltz on that evening, she would have repudiated the idea almost with horror. How easy is the path down the shores of the Avernus! but then, – was she going down the shores of the Avernus?

She was still walking through the crowd, leaning on her partner's arm, and answering his good-natured questions almost in monosyllables, when she was gently touched on the arm by a fan, and on turning found herself confronted by Luke Rowan

and his sister. "I've been trying to get at you so long," said he, making some sort of half apology to Cornbury, "and haven't been able; though once I very nearly danced you down without your knowing it."

"We're so much obliged to you for letting us escape," said Cornbury; "are we not, Miss Ray?"

"We carried heavy metal, I can tell you," said Rowan. "But I must introduce you to my sister. Where on earth have you been for these ten days?" Then the introduction was made, and young Cornbury, finding that his partner was in the hands of another lady, slipped away.

"I have heard a great deal about you, Miss Ray," said Mary Rowan.

"Have you? I don't know who should say much about me." The words sounded uncivil, but she did not know what words to choose.

"Oh, from Cherry especially; – and – and from my brother."

"I'm very glad to make your acquaintance," said Rachel.

"He told me that you would have been sure to come and walk with us, and we have all been saying that you had disappeared."

"I have been kept at home," said Rachel, who could not help remembering all the words of the churchyard interview, and feeling them down to her finger nails. He must have known why she had not again joined the girls from the brewery in their walks. Or had he forgotten that he had called her Rachel, and held her fast by the hand? Perhaps he did these things so often to other

girls that he thought nothing of them!

"You have been keeping yourself up for the ball," said Rowan. "Precious people are right to make themselves scarce. And now what vacancies have you got for me?"

"Vacancies!" said Rachel.

"You don't mean to say you've got none. Look here, I've kept all these on purpose for you, although twenty girls have begged me to dispose of them in their favour."

"Oh, Luke, how can you tell such fibs?" said his sister.

"Well; – here they are," and he showed his card.

"I'm not engaged to anybody," said Rachel; "except for one quadrille to Mr. Cornbury, – that gentleman who just went away."

"Then you've no excuse for not filling up my vacancies, – kept on purpose for you, mind." And immediately her name was put down for she knew not what dances. Then he took her card and scrawled his own name on it in various places. She knew that she was weak to let him thus have his way in everything; but he was strong and she could not hinder him.

She was soon left with Mary Rowan, as Luke went off to fulfil the first of his numerous engagements. "Do you like my brother?" said she. "But of course I don't mean you to answer that question. We all think him so very clever."

"I'm sure he is very clever."

"A great deal too clever to be a brewer. But you mustn't say that I said so. I wanted him to go into the army."

"I shouldn't at all like that for my brother – if I had one."

"And what would you like?"

"Oh, I don't know. I never had a brother; – perhaps to be a clergyman."

"Yes; that would be very nice; but Luke would never be a clergyman. He was going to be an attorney, but he didn't like that at all. He says there's a great deal of poetry in brewing beer, but of course he's only quizzing us. Oh, here's my partner. I do so hope I shall see you very often while I'm at Baslehurst." Then Rachel was alone, but Mrs. Tappitt came up to her in a minute. "My dear," said she, "Mr. Griggs desires the honour of your hand for a quadrille." And thus Rachel found herself standing up with the odious Mr. Griggs. "I do so pity you," said Cherry, coming behind her for a moment. "Remember, you need not do it more than once. I don't mean to do it again."

After that she was allowed to sit still while a polka was being performed. Mrs. Cornbury came to her saying a word or two; but she did not stay with her long, so that Rachel could think about Luke Rowan, and try to make up her mind as to what words she should say to him. She furtively looked down upon her card and found that he had written his own name to five dances, ending with Sir Roger de Coverley at the close of the evening. It was quite impossible that she should dance five dances with him, so she thought that she would mark out two with her nail. The very next was one of them, and during that she would explain to him what she had done. The whole thing loomed large in her thoughts

and made her feel anxious. She would have been unhappy if he had not come to her at all, and now she was unhappy because he had thrust himself upon her so violently, – or if not unhappy, she was at any rate uneasy. And what should she say about the elm-trees? Nothing, unless he spoke to her about them. She fancied that he would say something about the arm in the cloud, and if so, she must endeavour to make him understand that – that – that – . She did not know how to fix her thoughts. Would it be possible to make him understand that he ought not to have called her Rachel?

While she was thinking of all this Mr. Tappitt came and sat beside her. "Very pretty; isn't it?" said he. "Very pretty indeed, I call it."

"Oh yes, very pretty. I had no idea it would be so nice." To Mr. Tappitt in his blue waistcoat she could speak without hesitation. Ah me! It is the young men who receive all the reverence that the world has to pay; – all the reverence that is worth receiving. When a man is turned forty and has become fat, anybody can speak to him without awe!

"Yes, it is nice," said Mr. Tappitt, who, however, was not quite easy in his mind. He had been into the supper room, and had found the waiter handling long-necked bottles, arranging them in rows, apparently by the dozen. "What's that?" said he, sharply. "The champagne, sir! there should have been ice, sir, but I suppose they forgot it." Where had Mrs. T. procured all that wine? It was very plain to him that she had got the better

of him by some deceit. He would smile, and smile, and smile during the evening; but he would have it out with Mrs. Tappitt before he would allow that lady to have any rest. He lingered in the room, pretending that he was overlooking the arrangements, but in truth he was counting the bottles. After all there was but a dozen. He knew that at Griggs's they sold it for sixty shillings. "Three pounds!" he said to himself. "Three pounds more; dear, dear!"

"Yes, it is nice!" he said to Rachel. "Mind you get a glass of champagne when you go in to supper. By-the-by, shall I get a partner for you? Here, Buckett, come and dance the next dance with Miss Ray." Buckett was the clerk in the brewery. Rachel had nothing to say for herself; so Buckett's name was put down on the card, though she would rather not have danced with Buckett. A week or two ago, before she had been taken up into Mrs. Cornbury's carriage, or had waltzed with Mrs. Cornbury's cousin, or had looked at the setting sun with Luke Rowan, she would have been sufficiently contented to dance with Mr. Buckett, – if in those days she had ever dreamed of dancing with any one. Then Mrs. Cornbury came to her again, bringing other cavaliers, and Rachel's card began to be filled. "The quadrille before supper you dance with me," said Walter Cornbury. "That's settled, you know." Oh, what a new world it was, and so different from the Dorcas meetings at Miss Pucker's rooms!

Then came the moment of the evening which, of all the

moments, was the most trying to her. Luke Rowan came to claim her hand for the next quadrille. She had already spoken to him, – or rather he to her; but that had been in the presence of a third person, when, of course, nothing could be said about the sunset and the clouds, – nothing about that promise of friendship. But now she would have to stand again with him in solitude, – a solitude of another kind, – in a solitude which was authorized, during which he might whisper what words he pleased to her, and from which she could not even run away. It had been thought to be a great sin on her part to have remained a moment with him by the stile; but now she was to stand up with him beneath the glare of the lights, dressed in her best, on purpose that he might whisper to her what words he pleased. But she was sure – she thought that she was sure, that he would utter no words so sweet, so full of meaning, as those in which he bade her watch the arm in the clouds.

Till the first figure was over for them he hardly spoke to her. "Tell me," said he then, "why has nobody seen you since Saturday week last?"

"I have been at home."

"Ah; but tell me the truth. Remember what we said as we parted, – about being friends. One tells one's friend the real truth. But I suppose you do not remember what we said?"

"I don't think I said anything, Mr. Rowan."

"Did you not? Then I must have been dreaming. I thought you promised me your friendship." He paused for her answer, but

she said nothing. She could not declare to him that she would not be his friend. "But you have not told me yet why it was that you remained at home. Come; – answer me a fair question fairly. Had I offended you?" Again she paused and made him no reply. It seemed to her that the room was going round her, and that the music made her dizzy. If she told him that he had not offended her would she not thereby justify him in having called her Rachel?

"Then I did offend you?" said he.

"Oh, Mr. Rowan, – never mind now; you must go on with the figure," and thus for a moment she was saved from her difficulty. When he had done his work of dancing, she began hers, and as she placed both her hands in his to make the final turn, she flattered herself that he would not go back to the subject.

Nor did he while the quadrille lasted. As they continued to dance he said very little to her, and before the last figure was over she had almost settled down to enjoyment. He merely spoke a word or two about Mrs. Cornbury's dress, and another word about the singular arrangement of Mr. Griggs' jewellery, at which word she almost laughed outright, and then a third word laudatory of the Tappitt girls. "As for Cherry," said he "I'm quite in love with her for her pure good-nature and hearty manners; and of all living female human beings Martha is the most honest and just."

"Oh! I'll tell her that," said Rachel. "She will so like it."

"No, you mustn't. You mustn't repeat any of the things I tell

you in confidence." That word confidence again silenced her, and nothing more was said till he had offered her his arm at the end of the dance.

"Come away and have some negus on the stairs," he said. "The reason I like these sort of parties is, that one is allowed to go into such queer places. You see that little room with the door open. That's where Mr. Tappitt keeps his old boots and the whip with which he drives his grey horse. There are four men playing cards there now, and one is seated on the end of an upturned portmanteau."

"And where are the old boots?"

"Packed away on the top of Mrs. Tappitt's bed. I helped to put them there. Some are stuck under the grate because there are no fires now. Look here; there's a seat in the window." Then he placed her in the inclosure of an old window on the staircase landing, and brought her lemonade, and when she had drunk it he sat down beside her.

"Hadn't we better go back to the dancing?"

"They won't begin for a few minutes. They're only tuning up again. You should always escape from the hot air for a moment or two. Besides, you must answer me that question. Did I offend you?"

"Please don't talk of it. Please don't. It's all over now."

"Ah, but it is not all over. I knew you were angry with me because, – shall I say why?"

"No, Mr. Rowan, don't say anything about it."

"At any rate, I may think that you have forgiven me. But what if I offend in the same way again? What if I ask permission to do it, so that it may be no offence? Only think; if I am to live here in Baslehurst all my life, is it not reasonable that I should wish you to be my friend? Are you going to separate yourself from Cherry Tappitt because you are afraid of me?"

"Oh, no."

"But is not that what you have done during the last week, Miss Ray; – if it must be Miss Ray?" Then he paused, but still she said nothing. "Rachel is such a pretty name."

"Oh, I think it so ugly."

"It's the prettiest name in the Bible, and the name most fit for poetic use. Who does not remember Rachel weeping for her children?"

"That's the idea, and not the name. Ruth is twice prettier, and Mary the sweetest of all."

"I never knew anybody before called Rachel," said he.

"And I never knew anybody called Luke."

"That's a coincidence, is it not? – a coincidence that ought to make us friends. I may call you Rachel then?"

"Oh, no; please don't. What would people think?"

"Perhaps they would think the truth," said he. "Perhaps they would imagine that I called you so because I liked you. But perhaps they might think also that you let me do so because you liked me. People do make such mistakes."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.