A Bankrupt Heart

A Novel

BY

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VOL. I
CHAPTER I.

Miss Llewellyn was standing at the window of her own room, in the house of Lord Ilfracombe, in Grosvenor Square, gazing at the dust-laden and burnt-up leaves and grass in the gardens before her. It was an afternoon towards the close of July, and all the fashionable world was already out of town. Miss Llewellyn had been reared in the country, and she could not help thinking how that same sun, that had burnt up all the verdure of which London could boast, had glorified the vegetation of far-off Wales. How it must have enriched the pasture lands, and ripened the waving corn, and decked the very hedges and ditches with beautiful, fresh flowers, which were to be had for the gathering. Her thoughts went back to rural Usk, where King Arthur built a bower for Guinevere, and in fancy she felt the cool air blowing over its fragrant fields and woods. She heaved a deep sigh as she remembered the place of her birth, and, as if in reproach for such heresy to her present condition, she drew a letter from her pocket and opened its pages.

Miss Llewellyn nominally held an inferior position in the house of the Earl of Ilfracombe. She was his housekeeper. Old-fashioned people, who associate their ideas of a housekeeper with the image of a staid, middle-aged woman whose sole business is to guard the morals and regulate the duties of the maidens of the establishment, would have stared at the notion of calling Miss Llewellyn by that name. All the same, she was a very fair specimen of the up-to-date housekeeper of a rich bachelor of the present time. With one exception, perhaps. She was handsome beyond the majority of women. Her figure was a model. Tall and graceful, without being thin, with a beautiful bust and shoulders, and a skin like white satin, Miss Llewellyn also possessed a face such as is seldom met with, even in these isles of boasted female beauty. Her features would have suited a princess. They were those of a carved Juno.
dant, rippling hair was of a bright chestnut color; her eyes dark hazel, like the tawny eyes of a leopardess; her lips full and red, and her complexion naturally as radiant as it usually is with women of her nationality, though London air had toned it down to a pale-cream tint. She was quietly but well dressed, too well dressed for one in her station of life, perhaps, but that would depend a great deal on the wages she earned and the appearance she was expected to make. Her gown of some light, black material, like mouseline-de-laine, or canvas cloth, was much trimmed with lace, and on her wrists she wore heavy gold bangles. Her beautiful hair was worn in the prevailing fashion, and round her white throat was a velvet clasped by a diamond brooch. The room, too, which Miss Llewellyn occupied, and which was exclusively her own, was far beyond what we should associate with the idea of a dependent. It was a species of half study, half boudoir, and on the drawing-room floor, furnished by Liberty, and replete with every comfort and luxury. Yet Miss Llewellyn did not look out of place in it; on the contrary, she would have graced a far handsomer apartment by her presence. To whatever station of life she had been brought up, it was evident that circumstances, or habit, had made her quite familiar with her surroundings. As she perused the letter she drew from her pocket, for perhaps the twentieth time, she looked rather pale and anxious, as though she did not quite comprehend its meaning. Yet it seemed a very ordinary epistle, and one which anybody might have read over her shoulder with impunity. It was written in rather an irregular and unformed hand for a man of thirty, and showed symptoms of a wavering and unsteadfast character.

"Dear N: I find I may be absent from England longer than I thought, so don't stay cooped up in town this beastly hot weather, but take a run down to Brighton, or any watering-place you may fancy. Warrender can look after the house. Malta is a deal hotter than London, as you may imagine, but I have made several friends here, and enjoy the novelty of the place. They won't let me off, I expect, under another month or two, so I shall miss the grouse this season. However, I'm bound to be back in time for the
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partridges. Be sure and take a good holiday, and freshen yourself up. Have you seen Sterndale yet? If not, you will soon. He has something to tell you. Whatever happens, remember your welfare will always be my first consideration.

Yours truly, Ilfracombe.”

Miss Llewellyn read these words over and over again, without arriving at any conclusion respecting their meaning.

“What can he mean?” she thought. “Why should I see Mr. Sterndale, and what can he possibly have to tell me that I do not already know? I hope Ilfracombe is not going to do anything so stupid as to make a settlement on me, for I will not accept it. I much prefer to go on in the dear old way, and owe all I have to him. Has not my welfare always been his care? Dear Ilfracombe! How I wish I could persuade him to come home and go to Abergeldie instead. I am sure he runs a great risk out in that horrid climate, especially after the attack of fever he had last autumn. If he were to fall sick again, without me to nurse him, what should I do?”

As she spoke thus to herself, she turned involuntarily towards a painted photograph which stood in a silver frame on a side table. It represented a good-looking young man in a rough shooting suit, with a gun over his shoulder. It was a handsome and aristocratic face, but a weak one, as was evidenced by the prominent blue eyes and the receding chin and mouth, which latter, however, was nearly hidden by a flaxen mustache. It is not difficult to discover with what sort of feeling a woman regards a man, if you watch her as she is looking at his likeness. As Miss Llewellyn regarded that of Lord Ilfracombe, her face, so proud in its natural expression, softened until it might have been that of a mother gloatting over that of her first-born. So inextricably is the element of protective love interwoven with the feelings of every true woman for the man who possesses her heart. The tears even rose to Miss Llewellyn’s handsome eyes, as she gazed at Lord Ilfracombe’s picture, but she brushed them away, with a nervous laugh.

“How foolish!” she said to herself, “and when I am the happiest and most fortunate woman in all the world, and
would not change my lot with the Queen herself. And so undeserving of it all, too!"

Women who honestly love, invariably think themselves unworthy of their good fortune, when, perhaps, and very often, too, the boot (to use a vulgar expression) is on the other foot. But love always makes us humble. If it does not, it is love of ourselves, and not of our lovers.

A sudden impulse seemed to seize Miss Llewellyn, and, sitting down to her pretty writing table, she drew out pen, ink and paper, and wrote hurriedly:

"My dearest, do you think I could enjoy a holiday without you? No! Whilst you are away, my place is here, watching over your interests, and when you return I shall be too happy to leave you. But come back as soon as you can. I don't want to spoil your pleasure, but I am so afraid for your health. You get so careless when you are alone. Don't go bathing in cold water when you are hot, nor eating things which you know from experience disagree with you. You will laugh at my cautions, but if you only knew how I love you and miss you, you would sympathize with my anxiety."

Miss Llewellyn had written thus far, when a tap sounded on the door of her room, and, on her giving permission to enter, a servant appeared, and addressed her with all the deference usually extended to the mistress of a house.

"If you please, ma'am, there is a young man and woman from Usk, below, who want to speak to you."

Miss Llewellyn became crimson, and then paled to the tint of a white rose.

"From Usk, Mary," she repeated. "Are you sure? I don't expect anybody this evening. What is the name?"

"O, I'm quite sure, ma'am! They said their name was Owen, and they asked particularly for Miss Llewellyn, the housekeeper."

"What is the young woman like?"

"Rather nice looking, ma'am, that is, for a person from the country. I'm sure they're not Londoners, from the way they speak, though I don't know where Usk is; but she's got nice curly hair, much the color of yours, ma'am."

"Well, well, show them into the housekeeper’s room, Mary; or stay, as his Lordship is away, you may as well put them in the library, and say I will be with them in a minute."

As soon as the servant had left her, Miss Llewellyn ran up to her bedroom, with her hand tightly pressed over her heart, and commenced to rapidly pull off her ornaments, and to take a plainer dress out of her wardrobe.

"If it should be a message from mother," she murmured, breathlessly, as she stripped off her finery. "They mustn’t go back and say they found me like this. Dear, dear mother! She would break her heart to find out the meaning of it all."

She threw the black-lace dress upon the bed, and, selecting a quaker-looking fawn cashmere from her wardrobe, put it on instead, and, having somewhat smoothed down her rippling hair, she tied on a black silk apron, and took her way down to the library. She opened the door with a beating heart, for she had begun to fear lest the strangers might prove to be the bearers of bad news to her; but, the moment she set eyes on the figure of the young woman, she gave vent to an exclamation of surprise and delight, and rushed into her extended arms.

"Hetty, Hetty!" she cried, hysterically, "my own dear sister! O, how is it you are in London? Why did you not tell me you were coming? You have not brought bad news, have you? O, don’t tell me that mother is ill, for I couldn’t bear it!"

"No, Nell, no!" exclaimed the younger sister, "they are all as well at home as can be. Mother and father are just beautiful, and the crops first-rate. But we, that is, Will and I, thought we would give you such a grand surprise! We have such news for you! You’d never guess it, Nell! Don’t you see who’s this with me? William Owen, our old playmate. Well, he’s my husband! We were married the day before yesterday."

"Married!" repeated Miss Llewellyn, incredulously. "Little Hester, who was always such a baby compared to me, really married! This is a surprise." And to prove how much she thought it so, Miss Llewellyn sat down on a sofa and burst into tears.
"O Nelly, you are not vexed because we did not tell you sooner, are you?" cried Hetty, kneeling down beside her sister; "we thought you would like the grand surprise, dear, and I made Will promise that the first thing he did was to bring me up to London town to see my beautiful sister Nell. And O Nell, you do look such a lady, I’m sure I feel so countrified beside you, I can’t say."

"You look too sweet for anything," replied Miss Llewellyn, kissing her, "and I was only crying a little for joy, Hetty, to think you are so happy. But what a child to be married! Why, how old are you? Not more than seventeen, surely!"

"O yes, Nell, you have not been home for such a time, you forget how it goes on. I was twenty-one last spring, dear, and you are twenty-four. But how different you are from what you used to be. Is it London life that makes you so grand? You look like a queen beside me. You must think I am a bumpkin in my wedding clothes."

"Nonsense, dear Hetty. One is obliged to be more particular in town than in the country. Besides, I am filling an important situation, you know, and am expected to dress up to it."

"O yes! I was telling Will all the way down from Usk, what a fine place you have, and such a rich master. O! Nell, is he at home, Lord Ilfracombe, I mean? I should love to go back and tell them I had seen a lord."

"No, Hetty; he is away in Malta, and not likely to be back for some time. But I’ve not spoken to my new brother-in-law yet. I suppose you can scarcely remember me, Will. Five years is a long time to be absent from the old home."

"O I remember you well enough," replied the young man, shamefacedly, for he was rather taken aback at encountering such a fine lady, instead of the maid servant he had expected to see. "I and my brother Hugh used to have fine games of cricket with you and my little Hetty, here, on the Island years and years ago. I suppose you’ve heard that Hugh has been elected to the ministry since you left Usk, Miss Llewellyn?"

"No, indeed, I do not think that Hetty has ever mentioned it in her letters to me. But I remember your
brother quite well. He was a very tall, shy lad, fonder of reading than anything else, even when a little boy."

"Yes, that's Hugh," replied the young man; "and he hasn't forgotten you either, I can answer for that."

"I suppose it makes you all very proud to have a minister in the family, William," said Miss Llewellyn, kindly.

"That it does, and he's a fine preacher, too, as Hetty here can tell you, and draws the people to hear him for miles round, so that the parson up at the church is quite jealous of Hugh's influence with his parishioners. And that's something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed. And what are you, Will?"

"O he's a farmer, Nell," interposed Hetty, "and we are to live with his parents at Dale Farm as soon as we go back. So poor mother will be left alone, Nell. How I wish you could come back to Panty-cuckoo Farm and stay with mother, now she's lost me."

Miss Llewellyn flushed scarlet at the idea.

"O Hetty, how could I? How could I leave my place where I have been for so many years now, to go back and be a burden on my parents? Besides, dear, I'm used to town life, and don't think I should know how to get on in the country."

"But you care for mother, surely," said her sister, somewhat reproachfully, "and you can't think how bad she's been with sciatica this spring; quite doubled up at times, and Doctor Cowell says it's bound to come back in the autumn. I'm sure I don't know what she'll do, if it does. You should have heard how she used to cry out for you in the spring, Nell. She's always wanting her beautiful daughter. I'm nothing to mother, and never have been, compared to you, and I've heard her say, dozens of times, that she wished that London town had been burned to the ground before the agency office had persuaded you to take service here. They do seem so hard on servants in this place. Here you have been five years away from home, and never once a holiday. I think Lord Ilfracombe must be very mean not to think that a servant girl would want to see her own people once in a way."

"You mustn't blame Lord Ilfracombe, Hetty," said her sister, hastily, "for it is not his fault. He would let me go
to Usk if I asked him, I dare say, but I have the charge of all the other servants, you see, and where would the house be without me? It is not as if there was a lady at the head of affairs.”

“Then why doesn’t he marry, and get his wife to do all that for him?” demanded Hetty, with the audacity of ignorance. “It does seem strange that a gentleman with such a heap of money should remain a bachelor. What does he do with it all, I wonder! And what is the good of such a big house to a man without a wife? Wouldn’t you rather that he was married, Nell? It must be so funny taking all your orders from a man.”

“You don’t understand, Hetty,” said Miss Llewellyn. “Lord Ilfracombe does not give me any orders. He never interferes in the household arrangements. It is to save himself all that trouble that he has engaged me. I hardly ever see him—that is, about dinners, or anything of that sort. When he is going to have a party, he tells me the number of people whom he expects, and I prepare for them accordingly. But this is all beyond your comprehension. It is past five o’clock. You and William will be glad of some tea.”

Miss Llewellyn rose, and rang the bell as she spoke, and, having given her orders to a very magnificent-looking footman, at whose servility Hetty stared, she resumed the conversation.

“Where are you two staying in town?”

“We have some rooms in Oxford Street,” replied her sister. “Do you remember Mrs. Potter, Nell, who took Mrs. Upjohn’s cottage when her husband died? Her sister lets lodgings, and when she heard we were coming to London for our honeymoon, she wrote to her sister to take us in, and we are very comfortable there, aren’t we, Will? And it’s such a grand situation; such lots of things to see; and Mrs. Potter said, as it might be our last chance for many a day, we ought to see as much as we could whilst we are here.”

“I think she is quite right,” replied Miss Llewellyn, smiling, “and I should like to add to your pleasure if possible. Will you come out with me and have some dinner after your tea, and go to a theatre in the evening?”
"O Nell, we had our dinner at one o'clock, roast pork and French beans, and very good it was, I suppose, for London town, though nothing like our pork at Usk. And aren't the strawberries and cherries dear here? Will gave sixpence this morning for a leaf of fruit that you'd throw over the hedge to a beggar child in Usk. I told the woman in the shop that she ought to come to Panty-cuckoo Farm if she wanted to see strawberries, and she said she had never heard of such a place."

"I think you'll be quite ready for the dinner, Hetty, for you will find our London teas very different from country ones," said Miss Llewellyn, as the footman reappeared with a teapot, and cups and saucers, and a plate of very thin bread and butter, on a silver tray, "and the theatre will keep us up rather late. I suppose you have been nowhere yet?"

No, of course they had been nowhere, and Miss Llewellyn selected the Adelphi, as the theatre most likely to give them pleasure.

"Nell," whispered Hetty, in a tone of awe, as they found themselves once more alone, "do you always have a silver tray to eat your tea off?"

Nell colored. She found a little evasion would be necessary, in order to circumvent the sharp eyes of her sister.

"Not always, Hetty," she answered, "but as nobody else wants it just now, I suppose John thought we might as well have the advantage of it. When the cat's away, you know, the mice will play. And we can't wear it out by using it a little."

Hetty looked thoughtful.

"But I think mother would say," she answered, after a pause, "that we ought not to use it unless Lord Ilfracombe knew of it, and gave his leave. I remember once when Annie Roberts came to tea with me, and boasted of having brought her mistress' umbrella because she was away, and it looked like rain, that mother sent her straight home again, and threatened, if Annie did not tell Mrs. Carey of what she had done, that she would tell her herself."

Miss Llewellyn looked just a little vexed. One might have seen that by the way she bit her lip, and tapped the carpet with her neat, little shoe.
"But your sister is not in the same position as Annie Roberts, Hetty, my dear," interposed William Owen, observing their hostess' discomfiture.

"No, that is just it," said Miss Llewellyn, recovering herself. "I am allowed—all the servants know that they may bring these things up to me when I have friends. Life in London is so different from life in the country—one expects more privileges. But there, Hetty, dear, don't let us speak of it any more. You don't quite understand; but you may be sure I would not do anything of which Lord Ilfracombe would not approve."

"O no, dear Nell, indeed you need not have told me that. I was only a little surprised. I am not used to such fine things, you know, and I just thought if your master was to walk in, how astonished he would be."

"Not at all," said Miss Llewellyn, gaily. "You don't know how good and kind he is to us all. He would just laugh and tell us to go on enjoying ourselves. But if we are to go to the theatre, I must run up and put on my things. William, will you have a glass of wine before we start? I have a bottle of my own, so Hetty need not think I am going to drink Lord Ilfracombe's."

Young Owen refused the wine, but Hetty was eager to accompany her sister to her bedroom. This was just what Miss Llewellyn did not wish her to do. She was in a quandary. But her woman's wit (some people would say, her woman's trick of lying) came to her aid, and she answered:

"Come upstairs with me by all means, Hetty. I should like you to see the house; but I will take you to one of the spare bedrooms, for mine is not habitable just at present. Plasterers and painters all over that floor. 'Come in here,' and she turned, as she spoke, into a magnificently-furnished apartment, usually reserved for Lord Ilfracombe's guests.

Hetty stared with all her eyes at the magnificence surrounding her.

"O Nell, how I wish mother could see this. It looks fit for a duchess, to me."

"Well, it was actually a duke who slept in it last, you little goose," cried Miss Llewellyn, as she hastily assumed a bonnet and mantle, which she had desired a servant to fetch from her own chamber. "But I don't think he was
worthy of it—a nasty, bloated little fellow, with a face covered with pimples, and an eyeglass always stuck in his eye."

"Doesn't Lord Ilfracombe wear an eyeglass, Nell?"

"O no, thank goodness! I wouldn't—" but here Miss Llewellyn checked herself suddenly, and added, "I mean, he would never do anything so silly. He can see perfectly well, and does not need a glass. But come, Hetty dear, we are going to walk down to the theatre, so we had better start if we wish to get good seats."

As they entered the porch of the Adelphi, a sudden thought struck innocent Hetty. She sidled up to her sister, and whispered:

"You must let William pay for our places, Nell."

"Nonsense! child, what are you thinking of? This is my treat. I asked you to come as my guests."

"But it isn't fair," continued the little bumpkin, "for you to pay for us all out of your wages. Won't it cramp you for the next quarter, Nell?"

"No, dear, no!" I have plenty for us all," returned her sister, hastily, as she paid for three places in the dress circle, and conducted her relations to their destination. Here, seated well out of observation of the stalls, as she thought, Miss Llewellyn felt free, for the next two hours, at least, to remain quiet, and think, an operation for which she had had no time since her sister had burst in so unexpectedly upon her. William and Hetty had naturally no eyes except for the play, the like of which they had never seen before. They followed the sensational incidents of one of Sims and Buchanan's melodramas with absorbing interest. The varied scenes; the clap-trap changes; the pretty dresses, all chained them, eyes and ears, to the stage, whilst an occasional breathless exclamation from Hetty, of, "O! Nell, isn't that beautiful?" was all the demand they made upon her attention. She had seen the piece before, and, if she had not done so, she had no heart to attend to it now. Her memories of home, and the old life she had led there, had all been awakened by the sight of her sister, and the manner she had spoken of it; and while Hetty was engrossed by the novel scenes before her, Miss Llewellyn was in fancy back again at Panty-cuckoo Farm, where she had
been born and bred. She was wandering down the steep path which led to the farmhouse, bordered on either side by whitened stones to enable the drivers to keep to it in the dark, and which had given the dear old place its fanciful name of "The Cuckoo's Dell." She could see the orchard of apple and pear trees, which grew around the house itself, and under which the pigs were digging, with their black snouts, for such succulent roots as their swinish souls loved. She sat well back in her seat, listening to the notes of the cuckoo from the neighboring thicket, and the woods that skirted the domains of General Sir Archibald Bowmant, who was the principal landowner for many miles around Usk at that period. What a marvelous, magnificent place she had thought the General's house once, when she had been admitted to view the principal rooms, by especial favor of the housekeeper. And now—why, they were nothing compared to Lord Ilfracombe's, the man whom little Hetty had called her "master." "And a very good name for him, too," thought Miss Llewellyn, as she finished her musings, "for he is my master, body and soul."
CHAPTER II.

At the close of the second act, as she was urging her sister and brother-in-law to take some refreshment, she was disagreeably interrupted by hearing a voice, which she recognized as that of Mr. Portland, a friend of Lord Ilfracombe’s. Jack Portland (as he was usually called by his own sex) was a man whom Miss Llewellyn particularly disliked, on account of his bad influence over the Earl. He was a well-known betting and sporting man, who lived on the turf, and by it, and whose lead Lord Ilfracombe was, unfortunately, but too ready to follow. She shrank back as she encountered him; but Mr. Portland was not easily rebuffed.

“Ah! Miss Llewellyn,” he exclaimed, as he scrambled over the vacant seats to reach her side; “is this really you? I thought I recognized you from the stalls, but could hardly believe my eyes. What are you doing in the dress circle? I have always seen you in a box before.”

“I am with friends, Mr. Portland,” replied Miss Llewellyn, with visible annoyance, “and one can see a play like this much better from the circle. We have been enjoying it very much.”

“You must be pretty well sick of it by this time, I should think,” returned Mr. Portland, with his glass stuck in his eye, “for I’ve seen you here twice with Ilfracombe already. By the way, how is Ilfracombe? When did you hear from him last?”

Miss Llewellyn was on thorns.

“Will you excuse me, Mr. Portland,” she said, with a face of crimson, “but I and my friends were just going to have some ices at the buffet.”

“By Jove! but you won’t,” exclaimed the officious Portland, “I will send them to you. How many do you want? Three?”

“Yes; three, if you please,” answered Miss Llewellyn, who saw no other way of getting rid of her tormentor, and dreaded what he might say before her sister.
“Who is that gentleman, Nell?” inquired Hetty, as soon as his back was turned.

“No one in particular,” said the other. “Only an acquaintance of Lord Ilfracombe’s. Don’t take any notice of him, Hetty. He talks a lot of nonsense.”

She was praying all the time that Mr. Portland, having given his orders to the waiter, might see he was not wanted, and go back to his stall. But he was not the sort of man who gives something for nothing. He meant to be paid for the attention, though in his own coin. The waiter soon appeared, bearing the tray of ices and wafers, and in his train came Mr. Jack Portland, smiling, as if he knew his welcome was assured.

“I’ve got you Neapolitan, Miss Llewellyn, you see. I remembered that Ilfracombe always orders Neapolitan. By the way, you never told me the contents of his last letter. He’s very gay at Malta, I hear. Always with those Abingers. Have you heard of the Abingers? He’s the admiral there. By George! Miss Llewellyn, I’d recall Ilfracombe if I were you. Send him home orders, you know. He’s been out there quite long enough; don’t you think so?”

Miss Llewellyn saw that Hetty and William were listening with open eyes to this discourse, and did not know how to stop Mr. Portland’s tongue. She would fain have got rid of him altogether; but of two evils she chose, what seemed to her, the least. She lowered her voice, and begged him to cease his remarks on Lord Ilfracombe, till they were alone.

“That’s the way the land lies,” he replied, with a wink in the direction of Hetty. “All right. Mum’s the word. How deucedly handsome you are looking to-night,” he added, in a lower voice, as he brought his bloated face in close proximity to hers; “tell you what, Miss Llewellyn, Ilfracombe’s a fool! a d——d fool, by George! to leave such a face and figure as yours, while he goes gallivanting after a set of noodles at Malta.”

At this remark, Nell flushed indignantly, and turning her back on the intruder, directed her attention to her sister, upon which Mr. Portland, with a familiar nod and an easy good-night, took himself away. As soon as he was out of
hearing, Hetty pestered her sister to tell her his name, and to confess if he was anything to her.

"I can't say I think he's handsome," she said, with a little moue. "His face is so red, and he stares so; but do tell me the truth, Nell. Is he your young man?"

"My young man! Gracious no, child! Why, I hate the fellow. I think he is the most odious, impertinent, presuming person I know. But he is a friend of Lord Ilfracombe's, so I am obliged to be civil to him."

"Ah! well, I wish you had a young man, Nell, all the same. Mother would be so glad to hear you were thinking of getting married. She often says that it is high time you were settled, and that you're far too handsome to be single in London; for that it's a dreadful dangerous place for girls, and specially if they're good-looking. She would be pleased to hear you were keeping company with any one that could keep you like a lady."

"But I'm not, Hetty dear, nor likely to be; so you mustn't get any ideas of that sort in your head. But let us attend to what is going on. I hope Will and you are enjoying yourselves."

"Ö lovely," said Hetty, with a sigh of ineffable content.

But Miss Llewellyn had not got rid of Mr. Portland yet. As she was pushing her way out of the corridor, when the play was over, she found him again by her side.

"Will you be at home to-morrow, Miss Llewellyn?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I believe so. Why?"

"Because, I particularly want to speak to you. May I call about three?"

"Certainly, if you really wish to speak to me; but I cannot imagine what you can have to say that you cannot say now."

"Ö that would be quite impossible," rejoined Mr. Portland, looking her straight in the eyes. "I couldn't even explain what my business with you is, but you shall hear all about it, if you will be so good as to receive me about three."

"I shall be at home," replied Miss Llewellyn, coldly, as she pushed her way out into the street, and entered a passing cab with her companions.
"I shall call for you both to-morrow about six o'clock, Hetty," she said, as she deposited them at the door of their lodgings, "and take you to the Alhambra. You'll see something there, more beautiful than you have ever seen before."

"O Nell, you are good," cried her sister, "and what a lot of money you must receive. It makes me wish that I, too, had come up to London town when you did, and gone to service, for then I might have saved some money to help Will furnish our rooms. I brought him nothing, you know, Nell—not even a penny. It seems so sad, doesn't it?"

"What nonsense," replied Miss Llewellyn. "You brought him your true, pure heart, and your honest soul; and they are worth all the money in the world, Hetty; and I am sure William thinks the same. Good-night. We shall meet again to-morrow."

And with a wave of her hand, she drove away to Grosvenor Square.

Her maid was waiting up for her, all consternation, to find she had left the house without calling in her assistance.

"Dear me! ma'am," she exclaimed, as she knelt down on the floor of Miss Llewellyn's bedroom to unbutton her dainty boots, "to think you could go out, and me not to dress you. When John told me you had left the house, and not even taken the carriage, you might have knocked me down with a feather. And in this dress and mantle, too. Dear, dear! wherever did you go? Not to the theatre, surely?"

"Yes, I did," responded her mistress. "I took some young friends from the country with me to the Adelphi; and, you see, Susan, the fact is, they are not used to fashionable dressing, so I thought I would not make them feel uncomfortable by being smarter than themselves."

"Many ladies thinks the same," remarked the maid, "though I don't hold with it; for it's a real pleasure to look at such dresses as yours, even if one can't have 'em for oneself."

She spoke rather more familiarly than servants usually do to their mistresses, for she knew perfectly well, though she dared not say so openly, that Miss Llewellyn was not a
gentlewoman any more than herself; but it was, she thought, to her profit to appear to think so. The Court favorite is generally the object of adulation and sycophancy until her reign is over. But Ellen Llewellyn had been accustomed to subservience for so long now, that she had almost forgotten that it was not hers by right. It was only at times that the truth was borne in upon her that she held the luxuries of life on an uncertain tenure. Her maid undressed her, and put her blue cashmere dressing-gown about her shoulders, and would have hovered around her for an indefinite period, chattering of every bit of news she had heard that day; but Miss Llewellyn was in no mood to indulge her, and dismissed her at last, rather abruptly. She wanted to be alone, to ponder over the surprise she had had that afternoon; to dream again of Panty-cuckoo Farm; to wonder how the dear old garden looked under the July sun; if her mother had aged much during the last five years, whether her father's figure were more bent, and his steps feebler; above all, she wanted to communicate her thoughts to some one who could sympathize with them. She felt too excited to rest, so she took up her pen again, and finished the letter, in the writing of which she had been interrupted that afternoon by her sister's arrival.

"I had written thus far, my dearest, when I was interrupted by the appearance of my little sister Hetty, from Usk, and her husband, William Owen, when I never even knew that they were married. O Ilfracombe, I was so surprised. They have come up to town for their wedding trip, expressly to see me, so I felt compelled to show them some attention. But I was so nervous. I hurried them out of the house as soon as I could, and took them to the Adelphi; and there, who should spy us out but Mr. Portland, who would keep on talking to me of you till I was fairly obliged to run away from him. What a fool he must be, to speak so openly before strangers. I could have boxed his ears. O, I never feel safe, or happy, except when I am by your side. How very glad I shall be when you come home again. Then you will take me up to Abergeldie with you for the shooting, won't you? Till then I shall not stir. How could I enjoy myself at a watering place all
alone? I have seen nothing of Mr. Sterndale yet, and cannot imagine what he should have to say to me. We never had much in common; indeed, I regularly dislike him. He always looks at me so suspiciously, as if he thought I was a wretched harpy, like some women we know of, and cared for nothing but your money and your title. Instead of which, I love you so dearly that I could almost wish you were a ruined costermonger, Ilfracombe, instead of the grand gentleman you are, that I might prove my love, by working for you, and with you. Ah! if I only could do something to return all your goodness to me; but it is hopeless, and will never be. You are too high above me. All I can do is to love you.”

And with much more in this strain, the letter ended. The excitement that had been engendered in Nell, by seeing friends from home, had been continued by writing her feelings to the man she loved; but now that it was over, and she lay down on her bed, the natural reaction set in, and she turned her beautiful face on her pillow and shed a few quiet tears.

“O how I wish Ilfracombe were here,” she sobbed. “He has been away four months now, and my life is a desert without him.” It is hardly bearable. And if Hetty or William should hear—if by chance any one who knows it, like that officious Jack Portland, should come across them, and mention it; and they should tell mother—it would break her heart, and mine, too. If he would only have the courage to end it, and do what’s right. But it’s too much to expect. I must not think of such a thing. I have always known it was impossible. And I am as certain as I am that there is a heaven, that he will never forsake me; he has said it so often. I am as secure as if I were really his wife. Only this world is so hard—so bitterly, bitterly hard.”

And so Nell cried herself to sleep.

But the next morning she was as bright and as gloriously beautiful as ever; and, when she descended to breakfast, the butler and footman waited on her as assiduously as if she had been a countess; and the coachman sent up to her for orders concerning the carriage; and the cook sub-
mitted the menu for that day's dinner for her approval. As soon as her breakfast was concluded, she gave an interview to Lord Ilfracombe's stud groom, and went with him into the forage and stable accounts, detecting several errors that he had passed over, and consulting him, as to whether his master might not, with some benefit to himself, try another corn merchant. So much had she identified herself with all the earl's interests, that she more than once used the plural pronoun, in speaking of the high prices quoted to her.

"This will never do, Farningham," she said. "We cannot afford to go on with Field at this rate. His charges are enough to ruin a millionaire. With four horses here, and eleven down at Thistlemere, we shall have nothing left to feed ourselves, soon."

"Very well, ma'am," replied the man, "I'll get the price-list from two or three other corn merchants, and submit them to you. I don't fancy you'll find much difference, though, in their prices. You see, with the long drought we have had this season, hay has risen terribly; and oats ain't much better; they're so poor, I've had to increase the feeds. Will his lordship be home for the hunting, ma'am?"

"O yes, I hope so, sincerely, Farningham. He says he shall miss the grouse this year; but I quite expect him for the partridge shooting. And, after that, he is sure to go down to Thistlemere for the hunting season. He couldn't live without his horses for long, Farningham."

"No, ma'am, he's a true nobleman for that, is his lordship; and I guessed as much. But I'm glad to hear you say so, for there's no heart in getting horses in first-rate order if no one's to see 'em or use 'em. Good-morning, ma'am, and I hope we shall see his lordship soon again, for all our sakes."

Which hope Miss Llewellyn heartily echoed.
CHAPTER III.

The morning was beautiful, though very warm, and Miss Llewellyn thought she could not spend it better than in taking a long drive. She felt as if she could not stay in the house. Some intuitive dread, or fear, she knew not which, possessed her—as if she had an enemy in ambush, and anticipated an assault. When she tried to analyze this feeling, she laid it to the proximity of her relations, and the possibility of their hearing more of her domestic life than she wished them to know.

“But it is all because Ilfracombe is not at home,” she said to herself; “if he were here, he would laugh me out of such a piece of folly. As if they possibly could hear. Who could tell them, when they know no one in London? I am a silly fool.”

When she entered the open carriage, and the footman attended her orders, she told him to drive as far into the country as possible.

“Tell Jenkins to go right away from town; up to Hampstead, or out to Barnes. I want all the fresh air I can get.”

So she was carried swiftly towards Wimbledon, and had soon left the hot bricks and mortar behind her, and was reveling in the sight of green hedges, and stretches of common.

“How fresh and sweet it all seems,” she thought; “but not half so fresh and sweet as round Usk, and by dear Pantycuckoo Farm. How luscious the honeysuckle used to smell that trailed over the porch by the side door; and how thickly it grew. I used to tear off the blossoms by thousands, to suck their petals. And the apple orchard. It was a mass of white and pink flowers in spring, like a bridal bouquet. They must have all fallen by this time, and left the little green apples in their stead. What a thief I was in my early days. I can remember lanky Hugh Owen catching me robbing Mr. Potter’s plum tree, and the
long-winded lecture he gave me on the rights of meum and tuum. I wonder if the sermons he preaches now are as prosy and as long. If so, I pity his congregation. He was always so terribly in earnest. What would he say if he knew all about me now?"

And here Miss Llewellyn's thoughts took a rather melancholy turn, and she sat in the carriage with folded arms, hardly noticing the rural scenes through which she was passing, as her memory went back to her girlhood's days, and her girlhood's companions. She did not notice the time either, until a church clock struck two, and reminded her that she had had no luncheon. She gave the order for home then, but it was nearly three before she reached Grosvenor Square, and the first words the footman, who opened the door to her, said, were to the effect that Mr. Portland was waiting for her in the drawing-room. Nell started. She had entirely forgotten the appointment of the day before.

"In the drawing-room, did you say!" she ejaculated. "I will go to him at once."

"Luncheon is on the table, ma'am," added the servant. "Shall I tell them to take it down-stairs till you are ready?"

"It is not worth while," replied Miss Llewellyn. "I shall only be a few minutes."

She walked straight up to the drawing-room as she spoke, throwing the hat she had worn on a side table, as she entered.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Portland," she said, as he held out his hand to her; "but I have been for a country drive, and quite forgot the time."

"That is a very cruel speech, Miss Llewellyn," remonstrated her visitor; "and when I have been counting the moments till we should meet."

Jack Portland was always a "horsey" looking man, and it struck Nell, that to-day he seemed more horsey than usual. By birth he was a gentleman, but like many other gentlemen by birth, he had degraded himself by a life of dissipation, till he had lost all claim to the title. His features, good enough in themselves, were swollen and bloated by indulgence in drink; his manners were forward and re-
pulsive; he had lost all respect for women, and only regarded them as expensive animals, who cost, as a rule, much more than they were worth. To Nell he had always been most offensive; not in words, but looks and manners; and she was only decently civil to him for the earl’s sake. Now, as he seemed disposed to approach her side, she got further and further away from him, till she had reached a sofa at the other end of the room. Mr. Portland was “got up” in his very flashiest style, but was evidently nervous, though she could not imagine why. His suit was cut in the latest racing fashion, and he wore an enormous “button-hole.” But his florid face was more flushed than usual, and he kept fidgeting with his watch chain in a curious manner. At last he found his tongue.

“Were you very much surprised when I asked you for an interview, Miss Llewellyn?” he commenced.

“I was, rather; because I cannot think what you can possibly have to say to me. We have but one subject of interest in common—Ilfracombe—and he is quite well and happy. Else, I might have frightened myself by imagining you had some bad news to tell me concerning him.”

Jack Portland looked at her rather curiously, as he replied:

“O no, the old chap’s all right. How often do you hear from him now? Every day? Is that the ticket?”

“I hear constantly,” replied Miss Llewellyn, in a dignified tone. “I had a letter yesterday. I was in hopes he might have fixed the date of his return; but he says his friends will not be persuaded to let him go, so that he shall be detained in Malta longer than he expected.”

“Ah! his friends are the Abingers, of course,” said Mr. Portland, sticking his glass in his eye, the better to observe her features.

“Perhaps. He did not mention them by name,” she replied; “but I daresay you are right. However, he is sure to be home for the pheasant shooting.”

“Doubtless,” replied Mr. Portland, “unless his friends persuade him to go somewhere else. But what are you going to do with yourself meanwhile, Miss Llewellyn?”

“I? O, I shall remain in town till his return, and then I suppose we shall go to the Highlands, as usual. Ilfracombe
wants me to go away at once to some watering place to recruit, but I should be wretched there by myself. I shall wait for him at home. He is sure to come straight to London, because all his things are here.”

She was looking as handsome as paint that day. The long drive had tinged her face with a soft pink; and her lovely hazel eyes were humid with emotion, engendered by her subject. Her rich hair had become somewhat disordered by the open air, and the haste with which she had removed her hat, and was ruffled and untidy. But that only added to her charms. What pretty woman ever looked so well, with neatly arranged hair, as when it is rumpled and blown about? She was half sitting, half reclining on the sofa, and her fine figure was shown to the best advantage. Portland’s eyes glistened as he gazed at her. What a handsome hostess she would make—what a presider over the destinies of his bachelor establishment. How proud he would be to introduce her to his sporting and Bohemian friends—the only friends whom he affected, and be able to tell them that this glorious creature was all his own. He became so excited by the idea, that he dashed into the subject rather suddenly.

“Miss Llewellyn,” he said, “you are aware, I think, of my position in life. Ilfracombe, dear old chap, has doubtless told you that I make a very neat little income, and that I am perfectly unincumbered.”

This seemingly vague address made her stare.

“He has never entered into details with me, Mr. Portland, but I have heard him say you are very well off—the luckiest fellow he knows, he called you.”

“I’m afraid I’m not quite that,” said Mr. Portland; “but still I am in a position to give any reasonable woman everything she can possibly require. My income is pretty regular, and I would engage to make a handsome allowance to any lady who honored me with her preference. I tell you this, because Ilfracombe has often told me that you have an excellent head for business. By George!” said Mr. Portland, again screwing his glass into his unhappy and long-suffering eye, “with such beauty as yours, you have no right to know anything about business; still, if you do—there you are, you see.”
"But what has all this to do with me, Mr. Portland," remarked Miss Llewellyn, with a puzzled air. "I am sure any lady you may choose to marry will be a very lucky woman. Ilfracombe has often called you the best fellow he knows. But why should you tell me this? Are you already engaged to be married?"

"By Jove, no! And not likely to be. Do I look like a marrying man, Miss Llewellyn? But there—I can't beat about the bush any longer. You must have seen my admiration—my worship for you. It is on you my choice has fallen. Say that I have not been too presumptuous—that you will consent to share my fortunes; that you will, in fact, look as kindly on me as you have on my fortunate friend, Ilfracombe."

At first, she did not understand his meaning; she did not realize that this farrago of nonsense had been addressed to herself. It was so entirely unexpected; so utterly unthought of. But when she did take in the meaning of his words; when she awoke to the knowledge that Mr. Portland, the intimate friend of Lord Ilfracombe, had dared to offer her his protection, Nell sprung from her position on the sofa, and retreated to the back of it. Her tawny eyes were blazing with fire; her hands were clenched; her breast heaved violently; she could hardly speak. Under the indignation of her burning glances, the man before her seemed to shrivel like a dry leaf before the flame.

"How dare you?" she panted. "How dare you insult me like that? What do you mean? How can I be your friend, or the friend of any man but Ilfracombe? I am his wife; you know I am, and shall be till I die!"

"His wife? pooh!" said Jack Portland; "don't talk rubbish to me like that."

"Yes, his wife! How could I be more his wife than I am? I love him—he loves me! We are essentially one in heart and word and deed. What could a marriage ceremony have done more for us than our mutual love has done? And then you, who know all this—who have known us so many years—you dare to come here and insult me in my own house, and, under the pretence of friendship, deal the deadliest insult you could possibly have hurled at my head! O how I wish Ilfracombe had been at home to
protect me from your insolence! He would not have let you finish your cowardly sentence. You would not have dared utter it had he been standing by! He would have taken you by the collar and spurned you from the door. I have no words in which to tell you how I despise you—how low and mean a thing you seem to me—how I wish I were a man that I might put you out of this room and this house myself! But rest assured that Lord Ilfracombe shall hear of your baseness, and will punish you as you deserve!"

Jack Portland still kept his glass fixed in his eye and stared insolently at her. He had elevated his eyebrows once or twice as she proceeded with her speech, and shrugged his shoulders as if she were not worth a second thought of his; and, as she mentioned her lover’s name, he smiled scornfully and waved his hand.

"Pray don’t talk in this fashion," he said, as she concluded. "I am sure Ilfracombe would tell you it was not worth making such a fuss about. As for insulting you, that is the last idea in my mind. I admire you far too much. Most ladies would, I flatter myself, have regarded my offer in a totally different light; indeed, no reasonable person could say that it was an insult, especially from a man of my birth and position."

"It becomes an insult," she answered, hotly, "when you address your proposals to the wife of another man, and that man your greatest friend."

"Perhaps it would, if she were his wife, or ever likely to be so!" returned Mr. Portland, with a sneer.

"But I am—I am!" cried Nell, passionately, stamping her feet; "and each fresh word you say is a fresh affront. People with your low conceptions of life cannot understand the strength of the tie between Ilfracombe and myself, because it has not been ratified by the law. You are not honorable enough to see that very fact renders it still more binding on a man of honor. Ilfracombe would die sooner than part from me, and I would die a thousand deaths sooner than part from him. Our lives are bound up in each others’. And, even if it were not so, I could never exchange him for you! Now do you understand, or must I say it all over again?"

Under the sting of what his proposal had suggested to
her, she was blazing away at him with twice her natural ferocity. At that moment she hated him with such a deadly hatred, for having presumed to remind her of the real position she held, that she could gladly have killed him.

"Pray say no more!" exclaimed Mr. Portland, as he prepared to leave her; "you've said more than enough, my pretty tigress, already; but the day may come when you will regret that you treated my offer with so much disdain. Young men's fancies do not last forever, my dear—a good sound sentiment is worth many vows. If Ilfracombe ever tires of you (or, rather, let me say, when he tires of you), you will remember my words. Meanwhile, luckily for me, there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. So good-by, my handsome fury! Won't you give me one kiss before we part, just to show there's no ill-feeling? No? Well! I must try to do without it, then—for the present, at least—and hope for better luck next time. Remember me to old Ilfracombe when next you write. Ta-ta!"

He lingered near her for a moment, as though expecting she would raise her eyes or put out her hand, but Nell did neither; and after a while he turned on his heel, and, insolently humming a tune, went on his way. As soon as Miss Llewellyn heard the hall door close after him, she rushed up to her own room, and, after locking the door, threw herself on the sofa, face downwards, and sobbed and cried in the strength of her wounded feelings, and the terrible doubt which Mr. Portland's words had seemed to imply. The servants came knocking at her door and worrying her to come down to luncheon, which was getting cold in the dining-room; but she would not go down-stairs, nor speak to any of them. It was the first time since her acquaintance with the Earl of Ilfracombe that the untenability of her illegal position had been brought so forcibly before her, and she felt all the more angry because she had no right to feel angry at all. She believed implicitly in her lover; she had accepted his assurances of fidelity as gospel truth; and she was passionately indignant and sorely outraged because Mr. Portland had not considered the tie between her and his friend as inviolable as she did. And yet, she was not
Lord Ilfracombe's wife! Beautiful Nell Llewellyn knew this only too well, as she lay on the couch sobbing as if her heart would break. Say what women will, in these days of misrule, about the charms of liberty and the horror of being enchained for life, there is a comfortable sense of security in knowing one's self to be honorably united to the man one loves—to have no need of concealment or misstating facts—no necessity of avoiding one's fellow-men—no fear of encountering insult from one's inferiors in birth and morals, because one does not wear a wedding-ring upon one's finger—that insignia of possession, which is so insignificant and yet so powerful. What would poor Nell Llewellyn not have given to have had one upon her finger now!

How terrible is the first dread of the instability of the love on which one has fixed all one's earthly hopes! Had her lover been within reach, Nell would have rushed to him with the story of her trouble, and received a consolatory reassurance of his affection at once. But she was alone. She could confide in no one, and Mr. Portland's proposal, having made her see in what light men of the world regarded her tie to Lord Ilfracombe, had made her heart question if they could be correct, and he regarded it as they did. Her passionate nature, which was not formed for patience or long suffering or humility, cried out against the suspense to which it was subjected, and raised such violent emotions in her breast that, by the time they were exhausted, she was quite ill. When at last she raised herself from her downcast position on the sofa and tried, with swollen eyes and throbbing brain, to collect her thoughts, she found to her dismay that it was past five o'clock, and she had promised to call for Hetty and her husband at six. Her first thought was to remove the traces of her tears. She could not bear that the servants should see that she had been crying. She would never let them perceive that her position in the house cost her any anxiety or remorse, but bore herself bravely in their presence as their mistress, who had not a thought of ever being otherwise. As soon as she had bathed her eyes and arranged her hair, Miss Llewellyn sat down at a davenport that stood by her sofa and scribbled a note to Hetty,
inclosing her the seats for the Alhambra for that evening, and excusing herself from accompanying them on the score of a violent attack of neuralgia. Then she rung the bell for her maid, and desired her to send the letter at once to Oxford street, by hand.

"One of the grooms can go on horseback," she said, "or James can take a hansom. But it must be delivered as soon as possible. And then you can bring me a cup of coffee, Marion, for I have such a headache that I can hardly open my eyes."

"Lor! yes, ma'am, you do look bad," returned the servant. "Your eyes are quite red-like, as if they was inflamed. You must have caught cold last night. I thought you would, staying out so late, and without the carriage."

"Well, never mind; go and do as I tell you," replied Miss Llewellyn, who felt as if she could not endure her chatter one moment longer.

It was characteristic of this woman, that what had occurred had planted far less dread of the insecurity of the position she held in her mind, than a deep sense of the insult that had been offered to her love and Lord Ilfracombe's. She felt it on his account more than on her own—that any one should have dared so to question his honor and suspect his constancy. Hers was so ardent and generous a temperament, that where she gave, she gave all, and without a question if she should gain or lose by the transaction. She loved the man whom she regarded as her husband with the very deepest feelings she possessed; it is not too much to say that she adored him, for he was so much above her, in rank, and birth and station, that she looked up to him as a god—the only god, indeed, that poor Nell had learned to acknowledge. He was her world—her all! That they should ever be separated never entered into her calculations. He had been struck with her unusual beauty three years before, and taken her from a very lowly position as nurse maid to be his housekeeper—then, by degrees, the rest had followed. All Lord Ilfracombe's friends knew and admired her, and considered him a deuced lucky fellow to have secured such a goddess to preside over his bachelor establishment. Naturally, the elder ones said it was a pity, and it was to be hoped that Lord Ilfracombe's eyes would
be opened before long to the necessity of marriage, and an heir to the fine old estate and title. Especially did his father's old friend and adviser, Mr. Sterndale, lament over the connection, and try by every means in his power to persuade Ilfracombe to dissolve it. But the Earl was of a careless and frivolous nature—easily led in some things, and very blind as yet to the necessity of marriage. Besides, he loved Nell—not as she loved him by any manner of means, but in an indolent, indulgent fashion, which granted her all her desires, and gave her as much money as she knew what to do with. But had he been asked if he would marry her, he would have answered decidedly, "No."
CHAPTER IV.

Meantime, the golden hours were slipping away in a very agreeable manner for Lord Ilfracombe at Malta. He had been accustomed to spend several weeks of each summer yachting with a few chosen companions, and, as soon as his little yacht, "Debutante," had anchored in view of Valetta, a score of husbands, fathers and brothers had scrambled aboard, carrying a score of invitations for the new-comer from their woman-kind. A young, good-looking and unmarried earl was not so common a visitor to Malta as to be allowed to consider himself neglected, and, before Lord Ilfracombe and his friends had been located a week in Valetta, they were the lions of the place, each family vying with the other to do them honor. Naturally, the earl was pretty well used to that sort of thing, especially as he had enjoyed his title for the last ten years. There is such an ingrained snobbishness in the English nature, that it is only necessary to have a handle to one's name to get off scot-free, whatever one may do. There was a divorce case, not so very long ago, which was as flagrant as such a case could well be, but where the titled wife came off triumphant, simply because the titled husband had been as immoral as herself. The lady had money; the lady had good looks—how far they went to salve over the little errors of which she had been accused, it is impossible to say, but the bulk of the public forgave her, and the parsons prayed over her; and she is to be met everywhere, and usually surrounded by a clique of adoring tuft hunters. Sometimes I have wondered, had she been plain Mrs. Brown instead of Lady Marcus Marengo, if the satellites would have continued to revolve so faithfully! But in sweet, simple, Christian England, a title, even a borrowed one, covers a multitude of sins! The Earl of Ilfracombe had naturally not been left to find this proof out for himself, but, to give him his due, it had never affected him in the least. He despised servility, though, like most of his sex, he was
open to flattery—the flattery of deeds, not words. Amongst the many families who threw wide their doors to him in Malta, was that of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, who had been stationed there for many years. Sir Richard was a regular family man. He had married sons and daughters, a bevy of girls on their promotion, and a nursery of little ones. The Abinger girls, as they were called, were an institution in Valetta. On account of their father’s professional duties, and their mother’s constant occupation with her younger children, they were allowed to go about a great deal alone, and had become frank and fearless, and very well able to take care of themselves in consequence. They personally conducted Lord Ilfracombe and his friends to see everything worth seeing in Malta, and a considerable intimacy was the result. There were three sisters, of the respective ages of eighteen, twenty and twenty-two, and it was the middle one of these three, Leonora, or Nora, as she was generally called, who attracted Lord Ilfracombe most. She was not exactly pretty, but graceful and piquant. Her complexion was pale. Her eyes, brown and not very large. Her nose sharp and inclined to be long. Her mouth, of an ordinary size; but her teeth ravishingly white and regular. A connoisseur, summing up her perfections, would have totaled them by pronouncing her to have long eyelashes, well-marked eyebrows, good teeth and red lips. But Nora Abinger’s chief charm did not lie in physical attractions. To many it would not have counted as a charm at all. They would have set it down as a decided disqualification. This was her freedom of speech, her quickness of repartee, her sense of the ridiculous, and her power of sustaining a conversation. Young men of the present day, who find their greatest pleasure in associating with women whom they would not dare introduce to their mothers and sisters, are apt to become rather dumb when they find themselves in respectable society. This had been much the case hitherto with the Earl of Ilfracombe. He had assiduously neglected his duties to society (if, indeed, we do owe any duty to such a mass of corruption and deceit), and had found his pleasure amongst his own sex, and in pursuing the delights of sport, not excepting that of the racing field, on which he had lost at times
a considerable amount of money. To find that his ignorance of society squibs and fashions, his slowness of speech and ideas, his inability to make jokes, and sometimes even to see them, was no drawback in Nora's eyes; and that she chattered no less glibly because he was silent, raised him in his own estimation. In fact, Nora was a girl who made conversation for her companions. She rubbed up their wits by friction with her own; and people who had been half an hour in her company felt all the brightness with which she had infused them, and were better pleased with themselves in consequence. Lord Ilfracombe experienced this to the fullest extent. For the first time, perhaps, in his life he walked and talked with a young lady without feeling himself ill at ease, or with nothing to say. Nora talked with him about Malta and its inhabitants, many of whom she took off to the life for his amusement. She drew him out on the subject of England (which she had not visited since she was a child), and his particular bit of England before all the rest; made him tell her of his favorite pursuits, and found, strange to say, that they all agreed with her own tastes, and lamented often and openly that there was no chance of her father leaving that abominable, stupid island, of which she was so sick. Miss Nora Abinger had, indeed, determined, from the very first, to secure the Earl, if possible, for herself. Her two sisters, Mabel and Susan, entertained the same aspiration, but they stood no chance against keen-witted Nora, who was as knowing a young lady as the present century can produce. She was tired to death, as she frankly said, of their family life. The Admiral would have been well off if he had not had such a large family; but thirteen children are enough to try the resources of any profession. Five of the brothers and sisters were married, and should have been off his hands; but the many expenses contingent on matrimony, and the numerous grandchildren with which they annually endowed him, often brought them back in forma pauperis on their father's hands. His nursery offspring, too, would soon be needing education and a return to England, so that Sir Richard had to think twice before he acceded to the requests of his marriageable maidens for ball dresses and pocket money. All these drawbacks in her domestic life
Nora confided, little by little, to her new friend, the Earl, until the young man yearned to carry the girl away to England with him, and give her all that she desired. He could not help thinking, as he listened to her gay, rattling talk, how splendidly she would do the honors of Thistlemere and Cotswood for him; what a graceful, elegant, witty countess she would make; what an attraction for his bachelor friends; what a hostess to receive the ladies of his family! The upshot was just what might have been expected. Lounging, one day, on a bench under the shade of the orange trees, which overhung the water’s edge, whilst their companions had wandered along the quay, Lord Ilfracombe asked her if she would go back to England with him. Nora was secretly delighted with the offer, but not at all taken aback.

"What do you think?" she inquired, looking up at him archly with her bright eyes. "You know I’ve liked you ever since you came here, and if you can manage to pull along with me, I’m sure I can with you."

"Pull along with you, my darling!" cried the young man. "Why, I adore you beyond anything! I don’t know how I should get on now, without your bright talk and fascinating ways to cheer my life."

"Well, you’ll have to talk to papa about it, you know," resumed Nora. "I don’t suppose he’ll make any objection (he’ll be a great fool if he does); still, there’s just the chance of it; so I can’t say anything for certain till you’ve seen him. He’s awfully particular—very religious, you know, and always says he’d rather marry us to parsons without a halfpenny than dukes who were not all they ought to be. But that may be all talkee-talkee. Though I hope you’re a good boy, all the same, for my sake!"

"O I’m an awfully good boy," replied Lord Ilfracombe. "This is the very first offer I ever made a girl in my life, and if you won’t have me, Nora, it will be the last. Say you like me a little, darling, whatever papa may say."

"I do like you ever so much, and I don’t believe there’ll be any hitch in the matter."

"But if there were—if your father has any objection to me as a son-in-law—will that make you break with me, Nora?"
"Of course not! There's my hand on it! But I don't see how we are to get married in this poky little place without his consent. But there! don't let us think of such a thing. He'll give it, fast enough. But we had better go home now and get the matter over at once."

"You'll give me one kiss before we go, Nora?" pleaded Ilfracombe. "No one can see us here. Just one, to prove you love me."

"Out in the open!" cried the girl, with comical dismay. "O Lord Ilfracombe! what are you thinking of? You don't know what a horrid place this is for scandal. Why, if a boatman or beggar came by, it would be all over the town before the evening. O no! you must wait till we are properly engaged before you ask for such a thing."

"I'll take my revenge on you, then," said the young man, gaily; but he was disappointed, all the same, that Nora had not given it to him.

Sir Richard Abinger was unaffectedly surprised when the Earl asked for an interview and made his wishes known. His daughters had walked about and talked with so many men before, without receiving a proposal. And that Lord Ilfracombe should have fixed on Nora seemed to him the greatest surprise of all.

"Nora," he reiterated, "Nora! Are you sure that you mean Nora? I should have thought that Mabel or Susie would have been more likely to take your fancy. People tell me that Susie is the beauty of the family—that she is so very much admired. We have always considered Nora to be the plainest of them all."

"I do not consider her so, Sir Richard, I can assure you," replied the Earl. "Although, at the same time, I have chosen her much more for her mind than her looks. She is the most charmingly vivacious girl I have ever come across. She is as clever as they're made."

"O yes, yes! very clever," said the old man; "but now we come to the most important matter."

"The settlements—O yes! I hope I shall be able to satisfy you thoroughly with respect to them."

"No, Lord Ilfracombe, not the settlements, though of course, they are necessary, but in my eyes quite a minor consideration. My daughter Nora is—well, to be frank
with you, she is not my favorite daughter. Perhaps it is our own fault (for the poor child has been left a great deal to herself), but she is more heedless—less reliable—how shall I put it?—let me say, more headstrong and inclined to have her own way, than her sisters. It will require a strong man and a sensible man to guide her through life—aye, more than these, a good man! The position you offer her is a very brilliant one, and I should be proud to see her fill it; but, before I give my consent to her marrying you, I must be assured that the example you set her will be such as to raise, instead of debase, her."

"I do not understand what you mean," replied the young man, with a puzzled air. "How can you possibly suspect me of setting my wife a bad example?"

"Not practically, perhaps, but theoretically, Lord Ilfracombe. Forgive me if I touch upon a delicate subject; but, in the interests of my daughter, I must lay aside all false scruples. I have heard something of your domestic life in England from the men who have come over here, and I must ascertain for certain that everything of that kind will be put a stop to before you marry Nora."

Lord Ilfracombe reddened with shame.

"Of course, of course," he said, after a pause. "How can you doubt it?"

"I am aware," continued the Admiral, "that men of the present day think little of such matters; that they believe all that goes on before marriage is of no consequence to any one but themselves. But it is not so. Some years back, perhaps, our women were kept in such ignorance of the ways of the world, that they believed only what their husbands chose to tell them. But now it is very different. Their eyes seem to have been opened, and they see for themselves, and act for themselves. I am often astonished at the insight given to me, by my own daughters, to female nature. Where they have learned it in this quiet little place, I cannot imagine. It seems to me as if they were born wide-awake. And Nora is especially so. She is ready to be anything you choose to make her. And if she found out that you had deceived her, I would not answer for the consequences."

"You may rely on my word, sir, that in the future I
will never deceive her. With regard to the past, I should like to make a clean breast to you, in order that hereafter you may not be able to say I have kept anything back. Others may also have represented my life as worse than it has been, and, as my future father-in-law, I should wish you to think the best of me. Some three years ago I fell in with a very beautiful young woman, in a humble station of life, whom I took into my household as housekeeper. After a while—there was nothing coarse or vulgar about her, and her beauty was something extraordinary—I succumbed to the temptation of seeing her constantly before my eyes, and raised her to the position of my mistress."

"I beg your pardon, Lord Ilfracombe," said the Admiral, looking up.

"Well, not raised, exactly, perhaps; but you know what I mean. We were mutually attracted; but, of course, it was understood from the beginning that the connection would only last until I thought fit to marry. Now, of course, I shall pension her off, and have already written to my solicitor on the subject. This is really all that any man can say against me, Sir Richard; and it is far less than the generality of young fellows of the present day have to confess to. My life has always been a clean one. I have no debts; my property is unincumbered, and I have no proclivities for low tastes or companions. If you will trust your daughter to my care, I promise that her private rights shall be protected as rigorously as her public ones."

"It is a grand position," said the father, thoughtfully; "and I do not know that I should be justified in refusing it for Nora. Only it seems very terrible to me about this other young woman. How is your marriage likely to affect her? I could have no faith in the stability of my daughter's happiness, if it were built up on the misery of another."

Lord Ilfracombe looked up astonished.

"O Sir Richard, you need have no scruples on that account, I assure you. These people do not feel as we do. I should have ended the business any way, for I was getting rather sick of it. To prove what I say is correct, I have already written to my man of business, Mr. Sterndale, to draw up a deed, settling five thousand pounds upon her,
which will secure her an ample annuity for a woman in her sphere of life. She was only a country girl, somewhere out of Scotland, I believe. She will be all right; and, honestly, I never wish to hear her name again."

"Very well, Lord Ilfracombe. Of course, under any circumstances, the termination of such a connection is a good thing, and I am glad to hear that the remembrance of it is distasteful to you. You are a man of honor, and therefore I accept your assurance that it is all over henceforth, and that you will make my daughter a kind and faithful husband. But be careful of her, and don't let her have too much of her own way. I've seen the bad effects of such a course of behavior before now."

So it was a settled thing that Miss Nora Abinger was to become the Countess Ilfracombe, and she rose in the estimation of the residents of Malta accordingly. She had been a fast, bold, flirting girl, as Nora Abinger; but when she was announced as the future Lady Ilfracombe, it was suddenly discovered that she was really excessively clever and witty; and, though no one could call her exactly pretty, there was something—jeune sais quoi, about her manner of holding herself, and the way she turned her head, that was certainly very fascinating. Her promised husband, who had discovered her fascinations before, and was admitted to the full enjoyment of all her willful moods, and witty sayings, fell more deeply in love with her every day, and hardly had patience to wait till the wedding preparations were completed, for the fulfillment of his happiness. If a thought of Nell Llewellyn crossed his mind at this period, it was only to hope that her interview with Sterndale had passed off quietly, and that she would have the sense to clear out without any fuss. So intensely selfish does a new passion make a man. The time had been when Nell, who was twice as strong, mentally and physically, as Nora Abinger, was Lord Ilfracombe's ideal of a woman. Her finely moulded form had seemed to him the perfection of symmetry; her majestic movements, the bearing of a queen; the calm, classic expression of her features, just what that of a well-bred gentlewoman's should be. Now, he was gazing rapturously, day after day, upon Nora's mobile face; on her slim and lissom figure, which,
stripped of its clothing, resembled nothing better than a willow wand; and listening eagerly to her flow of nonsensical chatter, during which she successively "checked," her parents and himself, ridiculed her acquaintances, scolded her younger brethren, and took her own way in everything. In truth, she differed as greatly from the loving, submissive woman, who lived but to please him, in England, as she possibly could do, and herein lay her attraction for him.

Nell Llewellyn was more beautiful, more obedient, and more loving; but Nora more new. He had become just a little bit tired of Nell, and he had never met a girl who treated him as Nora did, before. She spoke to him exactly as she chose; she didn't seem to care a pin about his title or his money. She contradicted him freely; refused his wishes, whenever they clashed in any degree with her own; and let him fully understand that she intended to do exactly as she chose, for the remainder of her life. She was a new experience to Lord Ilfracombe, who had been accustomed to be deferred to in everything. Perhaps she knew this; perhaps she was "cute" enough to guess the likeliest method by which to snare the fish she had set her heart on catching. Anyway, the bait took, and the gudgeon was netted. The Earl of Ilfracombe and Miss Nora Abinger were formally engaged, and the wedding day was fixed. But still the young lady did not relax her discipline, and her lover's privileges remained few and far between.

"Paws off, Pompey!" she would cry, if he attempted to take any of the familiarities permissible to engaged people. "Do you want Vicenzo or Giorgione to make us the jest of Valetta? Don't you know that 'spooning' is out of fashion? We leave all that sort of thing to the hoi polloi now-a-days."

"O do we?" the young man would retort, playfully. "Then I'll belong to the hoi polloi, Nora, if you please. At all events, I'm going to have a kiss."

"At all events, you're going to have no such thing; at least, not now. There'll be plenty of time for all that kind of nonsense after we're married, and we're not there yet, you know. Don't forget, there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip."
Then, seeing him frown, she would add, coaxingly, twisting her mouth up into the most seductive curves as she spoke:

"There, don't be vexed. You'll have too much of kissing some day, you know. Come out in the boat with me. You're the most troublesome boy I ever knew. There's no keeping you in order in the house."

So he would follow her obediently, with his longing still ungratified, and always looking forward to a luckier to-morrow. Whoever had been her instructor, Miss Nora Abinger had certainly learnt the art of keeping a man at her feet. Perhaps the same thought struck him also; for one day, when they were alone together, he asked her if he were the only man she had ever loved. Nora looked at him with the keenest appreciation lurking in the corners of her mirthful eyes.

"Are you the only man I've ever loved, Ilfracombe?" she repeated, after him; "well, I don't think so."

"You don't think so? Good heavens! do you mean to tell me you've had other lovers beside myself?" he exclaimed, getting into a sudden fury.

"My dear boy, do you know how old I am? Twenty, last birthday. What are you dreaming of? Do you suppose all the men in Malta are deaf, dumb, and blind? Of course I've had other lovers; scores of them."

"But you didn't love them, Nora—not as you love me?" Lord Ilfracombe asked, anxiously.

"Well, before I can answer that question, we must decide how much I do love you. Any way, I didn't marry any of them, though I might have had a dozen husbands by this time, if I had accepted them all. As it is, you see, I chucked them over."

"But were you engaged to any of them, Nora?" he persisted.

She might easily have said "no," but it was not in this girl's nature to deceive. She was frankly naughty, defiantly so, some people might have said; and rather gloried in her faults than otherwise. Besides, she dearly loved to tease her lover, and tyrannize over him.

"O yes, I was," she replied; "that is, I had a kind of a sort of an engagement with several of them. But it
amounted to nothing. There was only one, of the whole lot, I shed a single tear for."

"And, pray, who may he have been?" demanded Lord Ilfracombe, with a sudden access of dignity.

"Find out for yourself," she said, pertly. "O, he was a dear. Quite six foot high, with the goldenest golden hair you ever saw. Not a bit like yours. I call yours flaxen; it's too pale; but his had a rich tinge in it, and he had such lovely eyes; just like a summer night. I nearly cried myself blind when he left Malta."

"It seems to me," said the Earl, with the same offended air he had assumed before, "that I am de trop here, since the recollection of this fascinating admirer is still so fresh. Perhaps I had better resign in favor of him, while there is still time."

"Just as you like," returned Nora, indifferently. "I have no wish to bias your movements in any way. But if you did not want an answer, why did you put the question to me?"

"But, Nora, my darling, you did not mean what you said. You did not waste any of your precious tears on this brute, surely. You said it only to tease me."

"Indeed, I did not. Do you imagine you are the only nice man I have ever seen—that I have been shut up on this island, like poor Miranda, and never met a man before? What a simpleton you must be. Of course I was engaged to him, and should have been married to him by this time, only the poor dear had no certain income, and papa would not hear of it. And I cried for weeks afterwards, whenever I heard his name mentioned. Would you have had me an insensible block, and not care whether we had to give each other up or no?"

"No, no, of course not; but it is terrible to me, Nora, to think you could have cared for another man."

"Rubbish!" cried the young lady. "How many women have you cared for, yourself? Come now, let us have the list."

The Earl blushed uneasily.

"I have told you already," he replied, "that you are the first woman I have ever asked to be the Countess Ilfracombe."
“And I didn’t ask you how many women you had pro-
posed to, but how many you had thought you loved. The
list can’t be so long that you have forgotten them all. Let’s
begin at the end. That will make it easier. Who was the
last woman before me?”

“That is a very silly question, Nora; and I consider that
I have already answered it. Besides, I am not a young
lady, and that makes all the difference.”

“In your idea, Ilfracombe, perhaps, but not mine. We
women see no difference in the two things at all. And if
you cannot produce a clean bill of health in the matter of
having loved before, you have no right to expect it of me.
Besides, my dear boy,” she continued, in a more soothing
voice, “do you mean to tell me, in this nineteenth century,
that you have reached your present age—what is your pres-
ent age, Ilfracombe, nine and twenty, is it not?—without
having made love to heaps of women? Not that I care
one jot. I am not such a zany. I think it’s all for the
best, since ‘pot will not be able to call kettle black,’
eh?”

And she glanced up into his face from under her long
eyelashes, in so fascinating a manner, that the Earl caught
her in his arms before she had time to remonstrate, and
forgot all about the former lover.

So the time wore away, each day more delightful than
the last, spent under the orange and myrtle trees, or in sail-
ing round the bay, until the longed-for wedding morning
broke, and they were married in the English church at
Malta. Their plans were to go to a hotel higher up in
the island for a fortnight’s honeymoon; after which they
were to start in the “Debutante” for the Grecian Isles, be-
fore returning to England.

A few days after his marriage, Lord Ilfracombe received
a letter by the English mail that seemed greatly to disturb
him. He was most anxious to conceal it, and his own feel-
ings regarding it, from the observation of his wife; and this
he had no difficulty in doing, as she did not appear even to
have noticed that he was unlike himself. The letter was
from a woman, long and diffusive, and he read it many
times. Then he entered their sitting room, and addressed
Lady Ilfracombe.
"Have you torn up the paper that contained the description of our marriage, darling?" he inquired.

"What! That local thing? No. I never looked at it a second time. It is somewhere about. What can you possibly want with it, Ilfracombe?"

"Only to send to one of my English friends, Nora. It is so funnily worded, it will amuse them."

And then he found it and put it in a wrapper, and directed it to Miss Llewellyn, 999 Grosvenor Square, London.
CHAPTER V.

Miss Llewellyn had almost forgotten that she was to expect a visit from Lord Ilfracombe's solicitor, Mr. Sterndale, when, one day, as she was sitting alone, his card was brought in to her. Hetty and William had returned to Usk by this time. Their modest resources could not stand out against more than a week in London, though their sister had helped them as much as they would allow her. So they were gone, taking the fresh smell of the country with them, and leaving Miss Llewellyn more melancholy and depressed than they had found her. For she had not heard again from Lord Ilfracombe since the few lines she had received on the day of their arrival, and she was beginning to dread all sorts of unlikely things, just because the unusual silence frightened her, like a child left alone in the dark. Hetty and Will had been most urgent that she should accompany them back to Usk, and, for a moment, Nell thought the temptation too great to be resisted. What would she not give for a sight of her dear mother's face, she thought—for her father's grave smile; for a night or two spent in the old farmhouse where she had been so careless and so happy; to lie down to sleep with the scent of the climbing roses and honeysuckle in her nostrils, and the lowing of the cattle and twittering of the wild birds in her ears! And Ilfracombe had urged her to take change of air, too. He would be pleased to hear she had left London for awhile. But here came the idea that he might return home any day, perhaps unexpectedly, and sooner than he imagined; and then if she were absent what would he think?—what would she suffer? She would not cease to reproach herself. O no! it was useless for Hetty to plead with her. She would come back some day—when she could have a holiday without inconvenience, but just now, with the master of the house absent, her mother would understand it was impossible—it would not be right for her, in her position as housekeeper, to leave the servants to
look out for themselves. So Hetty, having been brought up very strictly with regard to duty, was fain to acquiesce in her sister's decision and comfort herself with the hope that she would fulfil her promise some day. But when they had left London, Nell felt as if she had escaped a great danger, and was only just able to breathe freely again. And had she accompanied them to Usk and gone to stay at Panty-cuckoo Farm, she would have felt almost as bad. To live under the eyes of her parents day after day—to have to submit to their eager questioning—to evade their sharpness, for country people are sometimes very sharp in matters that affect their domestic happiness, and very proud and eager for revenge when their family honor is compromised; all this, Nell felt, she dared not, under present circumstances, undergo. So she was sorry and glad to part with her sister at the same time, but her advent had so put other matters out of her head, that she was quite startled at receiving Mr. Sterndale's card. It revived all the old curiosity which the first notice of his coming had evoked in her mind. What on earth could he possibly have to say to her? However, that question would soon be put to rest, and she was bound, for Ilfracombe's sake, to receive him. She happened to be in her boudoir at the time, and told the servant to desire her visitor to walk up there. Nell knew that the lawyer did not like her, and the feeling was reciprocal.

Mr. Sterndale was a little, old man of sixty, with silver hair, a very cute lawyer, and a firm friend, but uncompromising to a degree—a man from whom a fallen woman might expect no mercy. Miss Llewellyn had said, in her letter to her lover, that she knew Mr. Sterndale regarded her as a harpy who cared for nothing but his money, and this estimate of his opinion was strictly true. With him, women were divided into only two classes—moral and immoral. The class to which poor Nell belonged was generally mercenary and grasping, and deserted a poor man to join a richer one, and he had no idea that she was any different. She was beautiful, he saw; so much the more dangerous, and all his fear of late years had been lest the Earl should have taken it in his head to marry her, as, indeed, except for Mr. Sterndale's constant warnings and entreaties, he would
have done. Now he rejoiced to think that his client was about to be wedded to a woman in his own sphere of life, for the news of the marriage had not yet reached England, and he had come to Grosvenor Square to fulfill Lord Ilfracombe’s request that he would break the intelligence to Miss Llewellyn as calmly and deliberately as if he were the bearer of the best of news. She did not rise as he entered, but, bowing rather curtly, begged he would be seated and disclose his business with her. She had been accustomed for so long to be treated by this man as the mistress of the establishment, that she had come to regard him much as Lord Ilfracombe did, in the light of a servant. Mr. Sterndale noted the easy familiarity with which she motioned him to take a chair, and chuckled inwardly to think how soon their relative positions would be reversed.

“Good-morning,” commenced Miss Llewellyn. “Ilfracombe wrote me word I might expect a visit from you, Mr. Sterndale, but I have no idea for what purpose.”

“Perhaps not, madam,” was the reply, “but it will soon be explained. Have you heard from his lordship lately?”

Miss Llewellyn raised her head, proudly.

“I hear constantly, as you are aware. Ilfracombe is well, I am thankful to say, and apparently enjoying himself. He has made some pleasant acquaintances in Valetta, and they are urging him to stay on a little longer, else he would have returned before now. He is longing to get home again, I know.”

“Ah! perhaps, very likely,” replied Mr. Sterndale, who was fumbling with some papers he held in his hand; “indeed, I have no doubt his lordship will be back before long—when he has completed another little trip he has in contemplation to the Grecian Isles.”

Nell’s face assumed a look of perplexity.

“Another yachting trip and not homewards? O I think you must be mistaken, Mr. Sterndale, or are you saying it only to tease me? He has been gone four months already, ever since the fifth of April, and I am expecting to hear he has started for home, by every mail. What has put such an idea into your head?”

“No one else than his lordship himself, Miss Llewellyn. In a letter from him, dated the beginning of the month,
but which, for reasons which I will give hereafter, I have not thought fit to bring to you till now, he distinctly says that, when certain arrangements which he is contemplating in Malta are completed, he intends to sail for the Grecian Isles, and does not expect to be home at Thistlemere till late in the autumn.”

Nell looked fearfully anxious and distressed. “I cannot believe it,” she said, incredulously. “Why should Ilfracombe make any arrangements without consulting me first? He always has done so. I might have wished to join him at Malta. We have been separated for such a long time now—longer than ever before, and I have told him how sick and weary I am of it—how I long to see him again!”

“The money has not run short, has it?“ inquired the solicitor; “for, if so, you should have applied to me.”

She gave a shrug of impatience. “My money has never run short, thank you,” she replied. “Ilfracombe thinks too much of my comfort for that.”

“It is his long stay abroad then that is puzzling you,” continued Mr. Sterndale; “but I am in a position to explain that. I have a painful task before me, Miss Llewellyn, but I don’t know that I shall make it any better by beating about the bush.”

“A painful task!” she echoed, with staring eyes. “For God’s sake, don’t tell me that my—that Ilfracombe is ill!”

“No, no! nothing of the sort! But has it never occurred to you, Miss Llewellyn, that circumstances may alter in this life—that a tie like that between you and Lord Ilfracombe, for example, does not, as a rule, last forever?”

“No, never,” she answered, firmly, “because it is no ordinary tie, and Lord Ilfracombe is a gentleman. I am as sure of him as I am of myself. He would never break his word to me!”

“There is no question of breaking his word. You know the conditions under which you took up your residence in this house, and that you have no legal right here.”

“Have you come here to insult me?“ cried Nell, shrilly, “How dare you allude to any agreement between Lord Ilfracombe and myself? I am here; that is quite enough for you to know, and the Earl has said that I am to remain.
I am sure he never desired you to come here and taunt me with my position."

"Taunt, my dear lady! That is scarcely the word to use. I was only reminding you, as gently as I knew how, that your position is untenable, and that young men are apt to change their minds."

"Lord Ilfracombe will not change his," replied Miss Llewellyn, proudly. "I am sure you have done your best to try and make him do so, Mr. Sterndale, but you have not succeeded."

"Perhaps not. I have certainly nothing to do with his lordship's prolonged absence from England; but, since you profess to be much attached to him, Miss Llewellyn, has it never occurred to you what a very disadvantageous thing for the Earl this connection between you is?"

"That is for the Earl to decide," said Miss Llewellyn. "You are right, and he has decided. Lord Ilfracombe is a young man who owes a duty to society and the exalted station he occupies. His friends and family have been shocked and scandalized for the last three years to witness the outrage he has committed against the world and them, and that he has never considered the importance of founding a family to succeed him and of leaving an heir to inherit his ancient title."

Miss Llewellyn's lip trembled, as she replied:

"All very true, I daresay; but Lord Ilfracombe prefers his present state of affairs to the opinion of the world."

"Happily, I am in a position to inform you, Miss Llewellyn, that he has at last come to his senses, and determined to do his duty in that respect. In this letter," said Mr. Sterndale, dangling one in his hand as he spoke, "Lord Ilfracombe desires me to break the news to you of his approaching marriage with Miss Leonora Abinger, the daughter of Sir Richard Abinger, which is fixed to come off at an early date."

"It is a lie!" cried Miss Llewellyn, as she rose to her feet, and drew herself up to her full height; "a mean, wicked lie, which you have forged for some purpose of your own. O, you need not look at me like that, Mr. Sterndale. I have known for long how you hate me, and how glad you would be to get rid of me. I have too much influence over
Ilfracombe to suit your book. If you could persuade me to leave this house, and then convince him that I had gone off with some other man, it would fit in nicely with your own little plans, wouldn't it? But you don't hoodwink me. I know your master too well. He never wished me to leave his protection, nor told you to forge that lie in his name. He has no intention of marrying; if he had, he would have told me so himself, and not leave it to an attorney to deal the worst blow that life could give me. Leave the house, sir! Till the man whom I regard as my husband returns to it, there is no master here but I. Go! and take your lies with you. I will believe your statement on no authority but that of Ilfracombe himself."

"And that is just the authority with which I am armed, Miss Llewellyn, if you will but listen to me quietly. What is the use of making all this fuss over the inevitable? You are acquainted with the Earl's handwriting. Will you kindly glance at this, and tell me if you recognize it as his?"

"Yes, it is his."

"Let me read it to you, and pray remember that the servants are near at hand and ready to make capital out of all they hear. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes."

"This letter is dated the second of July."

"Dear Sterndale: You will be surprised, and, I suppose, delighted, to hear that I am engaged to be married to Miss Leonora Abinger, the second daughter of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, a young lady of twenty. The wedding will take place within six weeks or so. Of course, the only difficulty with me is Miss Llewellyn. The news will be unexpected to her, and I am not quite sure how she will take it. We have been together now for three years, and that is a long time. However, she is a very sensible woman, and must have known from the beginning that it was impossible such a state of things could go on forever. Will you go, like a good soul, and break it to her? Of course she must be well provided for. What would be a suitable sum? Five thousand pounds? Draw up a settlement for whatever you consider best; but I want
to be generous to her, for she has been very good to me. I should consider myself a scoundrel if I did not provide for her for life; but she will doubtless marry before long, and a few thousand will form a nice little dot for her. After my marriage, I am going to take my wife straight to the Grecian Isles, in the 'Debutante,' so that we shall not be home till late in the autumn. You will see, like a good friend, that the coast is quite clear before then. We mean to go to Thistlemere for Christmas, and while the town house is being done up."

"There, Miss Llewellyn," said Mr. Sterndale, as he came to a full stop, "that is all of the letter that concerns you. The rest consists of directions about draining and decoration, and matters that ladies do not trouble their heads about. You perfectly understand now, I am sure, and will absolve me from attempting to deceive you in the business."

He glanced at her as he spoke, and observed she was sitting on the couch, with her head drooping on her breast.

"May I see the letter?" was all she said.

He placed it in her hands, and she perused the portion he had read aloud, mechanically. Then she held it out to him again, and he pocketed it. But he wished she would say something. He did not like her total silence. It was so unlike Miss Llewellyn. With a view to disperse it, he continued:

"I told you I had a reason for not having called on you before. It was because I thought it best to have the settlement, which his lordship proposes to make upon you, properly drawn up, that you may be perfectly convinced of his good intentions towards you. The deed, of course, will not be complete without his signature; but, with a man of Lord Ilfracombe's honor, you may rest assured of his signing it on the first possible occasion; and, meanwhile, I am prepared, on my own account, to advance you any sum of money of which you may stand in need."

Still she did not answer his remarks, but sat silent and immovable, with her features concealed by the drooping of her head.

"His lordship is sure to be home before the winter; but if
you wish to have this sum invested for you at once, I know I shall only be meeting his wishes in helping you to do so. Perhaps you would like me to put the money into the Earl’s own coal mines, Miss Llewellyn. They are an excellent investment, and the shares are paying seven per cent., a rate of interest which you are not likely to get elsewhere. And it would have this further advantage: that in case of any unforeseen accident, or depreciation in the market, I feel sure the Earl would never hear of your losing your money, whatever the other shareholders might do. The John Penn mine is yielding wonderfully—so is the Llewellyn, which, if I mistake not, the Earl called after yourself.”

“Are you a man?” demanded Nell, slowly raising her head, “or are you a devil? Cease chattering to me about your coal mines and shareholders. When I want to invest money, I shall not come to you to help or advise me. Do you suppose that I don’t know that if this letter speaks truth—that if my—if the Earl contemplates doing what he says, it is not owing, in a great measure, to your advice and exhortations? You were forever dinning the necessity of marriage into his ears. We have laughed over it together.”

“Have you, indeed? Well, I don’t deny it. I have done my duty by Lord Ilfracombe, and I’m very glad to find that my advice has had a good effect. You laughed too soon, Miss Llewellyn; but whatever influence has been brought to bear upon his lordship, the fact remains, that it has been successful, and he is about to be married—may even now be married, at the present moment. Nothing now remains to be done, but for you to look at this settlement, and decide how soon it will be convenient for you to leave Grosvenor Square.”

He laid the paper on her lap as he spoke, but Miss Llewellyn sprang to her feet, and, seizing the document in her strong grasp, tore it across, and flung the fragments in the solicitor’s face.

“Go back to your master!” she exclaimed; “to the man who was good and true and honorable until your crafty advice and insinuations made him forget his nobler nature, and tell him to take his money and spend it on the woman he marries, for I will have none of it! Does he think he can pay me for my love, my faith, my honor? In God’s
sight, I am the wife of Lord Ilfracombe, and I will not accept his alms as if I were a beggar! For three years I have lived by his side, sharing all that was his—his pleasures, his troubles, and his pains! He has had all my love, my devotion, my duty! I have nursed him in sickness, and looked after his interests at all times, and I will not be remunerated for my services as if I were an hireling. Tell him I am his wife, and I throw his money back in his face. He can never pay me for what I have been to him! He will never find another woman to fill my place.”

“But, my dear madam, this is folly! Let me entreat you to be reasonable,” said Mr. Sterndale, as he picked up the torn settlement. “You may have thought all this, but you know it is not tenable. You are not Lord Ilfracombe’s wife, and you never will be! You have been the most excellent of friends and companions—I admit that freely; but the time has come for parting, and the wisest and most sensible thing for you to do is to acquiesce in his lordship’s decision and effect this little alteration in his domestic arrangements as quietly as possible. It must be, you know! Why not let it pass without scandal?”

“We have not been only friends and companions,” she repeated, scornfully; “we have been the dearest and closest of lovers and confidantes! O why should I speak to you of it? What should you know of such things? It is not in you to love any one as I have loved Ilfracombe, and he has loved me! But I do not believe your story, not even from the letter you showed me! I don’t believe he wrote it! You lawyers are cunning enough for anything! You may have forged his writing. So I reject your news and your settlement and yourself! Leave me at once, and don’t come near me again. I will accept this assurance from no one but Ilfracombe, and I shall not quit his house till he tells me to do so. He left me in charge here, and I do not relinquish it till my master bids me go.”

“He’ll bid you fast enough,” replied the solicitor, as he gathered up his papers and prepared to leave her; “and it will be your own fault, Miss Llewellyn, if your exit is made more unpleasant to you than it need have been. The decorators will be in the house, probably, before you get any answer to your appeal to his lordship.”
"Then I shall superintend the decorators," she said, haughtily. "As long as any one sleeps here, I shall sleep here, unless Ilfracombe tells me to go."

"Very ill-advised, very foolish," remarked Mr. Sterndale; "but don't blame me if you suffer for your obstinacy!"

"All I want is to get rid of you!" she cried. "I have always disliked you, and now I hate you—like poison!"

"Much obliged, I'm sure," he said, as he left the room.

But he revenged himself for the affronts she had put upon him, as he went down-stairs.

"You must tell the women to look after poor Miss Llewellyn," he whispered to the footman who let him out, "for I have been the bearer of bad news to her."

"Indeed, sir!" said the man.

"Yes, though it is the best possible for all the rest of you. Your master is to be married very shortly to a young lady in Malta. There will be high jinks for all of you servants when he brings his bride home to England; but you must know what it will mean for her"—jerking his thumb toward the upper story.

"Well, naturally," acquiesced the footman, with a wink.

"She won't be here long, but you must make her as comfortable as you can during her stay. And you are welcome to tell the news everywhere. It's no secret. I've a letter from the Earl in my pocket to say that he will bring her ladyship home in time for the Christmas festivities at Thistlemere. Good-morning!"

"Good-morning, sir!" echoed the footman, and rushed down to the servants' hall to disseminate the tidings.

Meanwhile, Nell, with her limbs as cold as stone and all her pulses at fever heat, was dashing off the impassioned letter which Lord Ilfracombe received a few days after his wedding.

"My darling, my own," she wrote, heedless of who should see the letter, "Mr. Sterndale has just been here to tell me you are thinking of getting married. But it is not true—I don't believe it—I told him so to his face. O Ilfracombe! it cannot be true. Write to me, for God's sake, as soon as you receive this, and tell me it is a lie.
The old man has said it to make me miserable—to try and get rid of me. He has always hated me and been jealous of my influence over you. And yet—he showed me a letter in your handwriting, or what looked just like it, in which you said that it was true. My God! is it possible? Can you seriously think of deserting me? O no, I will not believe it till you tell me so yourself. You could not part with me after all these years. Darling, think of the time when you first saw me, at Mrs. Beresford’s, when she brought you up into the nursery to see her little baby. I was sitting on a footstool before the fire, nursing it. I stood up when you and my mistress entered, but, instead of looking at the baby, you looked at me. I overheard Mrs. Beresford chaff you about it as you went down-stairs again, and you said, ‘Well, you shouldn’t have such lovely nursemaids, then.’ I was only twenty, then, dearest, and with no more sense than a town-bred girl of sixteen. I dreamed of those words of yours, and I dreamed of you, as the noblest and handsomest gentleman I had ever seen, as indeed you were. And then you began to call at Mrs. Beresford’s two and three times a week, and to meet me in the park, until that happy day came when you asked me if I would leave my place, and be your housekeeper in Grosvenor Square. I thought it was a grand rise for me, and wrote and told my people so; but, even then, I didn’t guess at what you meant, or that you loved me in that way. Ilfracombe, you know I was an innocent, good girl when I first came to this house, and that I shouldn’t have ever been otherwise, had you not persuaded me that, if our hearts were truly each other’s, our marriage would be as lasting as if we had gone to church together. I believed you. I knew it was wrong; but I loved you, and I believed you. O my own, only darling, don’t desert me now. What is to become of me if you do? I can’t go back to my own people. I am no longer fit to associate with them. You have raised me to the dignity of your companionship. You have unfitted me for country life, and how can I go out to service again? Who would take me? Everybody knows our history. I have no character. Darling, do you remember the time when you had the typhoid fever, and were so ill we thought that you would die? O, what a fearful time that
was. And when you recovered, you were going to marry me, at least you said so, and I was so happy, and yet so afraid of what your family would think. But you had quite made up your mind about it, or I believed so, till Mr. Sterndale heard you mention the subject, and talked you out of it. You never told me, but I guessed it all the same. I never reproached you for it, did I, or reminded you of your promise? I knew I was no fit wife for you—only fit to love and serve you, as I have done, gladly and faithfully. How can you marry another woman, when I have been your wife for three long, happy years? Won't the remembrance of me come between you and her? Won't you often think of the many, many times you have declared you should never think of marrying whilst I lived—that I was your wife to all intents and purposes—and that any other woman would seem an interloper? O Ilfracombe, do try and remember all these things before you perpetrate an action for which you will reproach yourself all your life. I know your nature; who should know it so well as I? You are weak and easily led, but you are sensitive and generous, and I know you will not forget me easily. Dearest, write to me and tell me it is a lie, and I will serve you all my life, as no servant and no wife will ever do. For you are far more than a husband to me. You are my world and my all—my one friend—my one hope and support. O Ilfracombe, don't leave me. I live in you and your love, and if you desert me I cannot live. For God's sake—for the sake of heaven—for your honor's sake, don't leave me.

Your broken-hearted

Nell.

So the poor girl wrote, as other poor, forsaken wretches have written before her, thinking to move the heart of a man who was already tired of her. As soon hope to move the heart of a stone as that of a lover hot on a new fancy. Her letter reached him, as we have seen, when the step she deprecated was taken beyond remedy; but it stirred his sense of having committed an injustice, if it could not requicken his burnt-out flame. He did not know how to answer it. He had nothing to say in defense of himself, or his broken promises. So, like many a man in similar circumstances, he shirked his duty, and seized the first oppor-
tunity that presented itself of putting it on the shoulders of some one else. Since Sterndale had failed in his commission, the newspaper must convey to his cast-off mistress the news she refused to believe. So he posted the little sheet of paper, printed for the edification of the British residents in Malta, to her address, and transcribed it in his own hand. She couldn't make any mistake about that, he said to himself, as he returned to the agreeable task of making love to his countess meanwhile. But the incident did not increase the flavor of his courtship.

There is a sense called memory, that has, on occasions, an inconveniently loud voice, and not the slightest scruple in making itself heard when least desired.

The Earl of Ilfracombe had yet to learn if the charms of his newly-wedded wife were sufficiently powerful to have made it worth his while, in order to possess them, to have invoked the demon of memory to dog his footsteps for the remainder of his life. But, for the nonce, he put it away from him as an unclean thing. Nora, Countess Ilfracombe, reigned triumphant, and Nell Llewellyn, disgraced and disinherited, was ordered to "move on" and find herself another home! Meanwhile, she awaited her lover's answer—in his own house. She refused to "move on" until she received it.

It was a very miserable fortnight. She felt, for the first time, so debased and degraded, that she would not leave the house, but sat indoors all day, without employment and without hope; only waiting, in silence and despair, for the assurance of the calamity that had been announced to her. Her sufferings were augmented at this time by the altered demeanor of the servants towards her. She had always been an indulgent mistress, and they had liked her, so that she did not experience anything like rudeness at their hands; on the contrary, it was the increase of their attentions and familiarity that annoyed and made her more unhappy—she read in it, too surely, the signs of the coming times—the signs that they knew her reign was over and the marriage of their master a certain thing. Nell felt as if she had been turned to stone in those days—as if the wheels of her life's machinery had been arrested, and all she could do was to await the verdict. It came all too
A BANKRUPT HEART.

soon. One lovely night, about a fortnight after she had written to Lord Ilfracombe, a newspaper was put into her hand. This was such a very unusual occurrence, that she tore off the wrapper hastily and turned the sheets over with trembling fingers. She was not long in finding the announcement of her death-warrant.

"On the 28th of July, at the British Consulate at Malta, the Right Honorable the Earl of Ilfracombe, to Leonora Adelaide Maria, fourth daughter of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, R.N.C.B."

And in another part of the paper was a long description of the wedding festivities, the number of invited guests and the dresses of the bride and bridesmaids. Miss Llewellyn read the account through to the very end, and then tottered to her feet to seek her bedroom.

"Lor, Miss, you do look bad!" exclaimed a sympathizing housemaid, whom she met on the way—it was a significant fact that since the news of his lordship's intended marriage had been made public in the servants' hall, poor Nell had been degraded from madam to miss—"let me fetch you a cup of tea or a drop of brandy and water. Now do, there's a dear! You might have seen a ghost by the look of you!"

"No, thank you, Sarah," replied Miss Llewellyn, with a faint smile. "You are very kind, but I have not met a ghost; only the day has been warm, and I long for a breath of fresh air. Don't worry about me! I will go out into the square for half an hour, and that will do me good."

The servant went on her way, and Nell turned into her bedroom. What a luxurious room it was! The furniture was upholstered in soft shades of gray and pink, and the walls were hung with engravings, all chosen by the Earl himself. There was a spring couch by the fireplace, before which was spread a thick, white fur rug. The toilet-table was strewn with toys of china and glass and silver. It was the room of a lady, but it was Nell's no longer. She walked deliberately to the toilet-table, and, opening her trinket case, examined its contents, to see if everything she had received at her lover's hands was in its place. Then
she quietly took off her dainty little watch, incrusted with diamonds, and her bangle bracelets, and two or three handsome rings which he had given her, amongst which was a wedding-ring, which she usually wore. She put them all carefully in her trinket case, and, scribbling on the outside of an old envelope, in pencil, the words, "Good-by, my only love. I cannot live without you," she placed it with the jewelry, and, locking the box, threw the key out of the window.

"That will prevent the servants opening it," she thought; "they will be afraid to force the lock, but he will, by and by, and then he will guess the truth. I do not rob him much by taking this gown," she said, smiling mournfully, as she gazed at her simple print frock, "and he would not mind if I did! He was always generous to me and everybody." Then, overburdened by a sudden rush of memory, she sank on her knees by the couch, crying, "O my love, my love! why did you leave me? It is so very, very hard to part with you thus!"

But, when her little outburst was over, Nell dried her eyes, and crept softly down-stairs. It was dark by this time; the servants were making merry over their supper in the hall; and the crowds, not having yet issued from the theatres, the streets were comparatively free.

Nell walked straight, but steadily, through Piccadilly and the Strand, till she came to Waterloo Street. She was dressed so quietly, and walking so deliberately, that a stranger might have thought she was going to see a friend; certainly no one would have dreamt of the fire of passion that was raging in her breast. No one looked round at her—not an official of the law asked her her business, or followed in her track. She even turned to cross Waterloo Bridge without exciting any suspicion in the bystanders. Why should she not be a peaceful citizen, like the rest of them, bent on a common errand? Had it been later at night, it might have been different. It was the early hour of ten, and the crowded pathway, that lulled all suspicion. Yet Nell was as distraught as any lunatic who ever contemplated suicide. She was walking to her death, and it was only a proof of the state of her mind that she went without a thought, excepting that the rest of forgetfulness
was so near. As she came to the center of the bridge, she stopped for a moment, and looked over the coping wall at the calm water.

"How deep it is," she thought. "What a fool I am to deliberate. It will be over in a minute, and it will be so sweet never to dream again."

As she mused in this manner, she gave a sudden leap, and was over before the passers-by could catch hold of her clothing. They gave the alarm at once, and a policeman, who was half-way down on the other side, heard it, and came hurrying up. But the waters of old Father Thames, who has received so many of his despairing children to his bosom, had already closed over the bright hair and beautiful face of Nell Llewellyn.
CHAPTER VI.

All the women who had witnessed the accident hung over the parapet of the bridge, screaming at the top of their voices, after the manner of their kind, whilst the men ran off for assistance. The police were summoned, boats with grappling-irons were put out, and every effort made to rescue the unfortunate suicide, but in vain. Nothing was seen or heard of the body. No craft had been immediately under the bridge at the moment. Two or three empty barges were moored in its vicinity, but their black beams could tell no tales. The search was not given up until it was pronounced unavailing, and the police went back to report the circumstances at headquarters. Next morning there appeared a paragraph in the dailies with the headline,

"MYSTERIOUS SUICIDE FROM WATERLOO BRIDGE."

"Last evening, as the large audiences were turning out of the transpontine theatres and wending their way homewards, a thrilling accident, or what might have been so, occurred on Waterloo Bridge. A tall, lady-like, well-dressed young woman was walking quietly amongst the passengers, apparently as soberly disposed as any amongst them, when, without sound or warning, she suddenly vaulted over the parapet and dashed into the river. The act was so unpremeditated, and took the bystanders so completely by surprise, that there was no opportunity of preventing the terrible catastrophe. The peaceful crowd was immediately transformed into an agitated mass, all striving to give the alarm or aid in rescuing the unfortunate woman. The police behaved magnificently on the occasion. In less time than we could write the words, boats were put out and every possible assistance given. But no trace of the body could be found, though the grappling-irons were used in every direction. It is supposed that she must have fractured her skull against one of the empty barges
moored in proximity to the bridge, and sunk beyond recall. The occurrence created a painful sensation among the by-
standers. Women were fainting, and men rushing about in all directions. Some people, who had followed the unfor-
tunate woman across the bridge from the Strand, describe her to have had a very tall and very elegant figure, and say that she was dressed in a black mantle, and wore a broad, black hat with a drooping feather. Everybody seems agreed that she did not belong to the lower classes, and it is to be feared, from the determination with which she sprung over the parapet, that her loss can be ascribed to nothing but deliberate suicide. The police are on the lookout for the body, which will probably turn up further down the river, when some light may be thrown on the identity of the un-
fortunate lady. The strangers who walked in her wake across the bridge observed that she possessed an abundant quantity of bright, chestnut hair, coiled low upon her neck, and that her hands, which were bare, were long and white. This makes the fifteenth suicide that has taken place from Waterloo Bridge in twelve months.”

Mr. Sterndale, the solicitor, sitting alone in his office, read this paragraph, and was very much struck by it, espe-
cially as Warrender, Lord Ilfracombe’s butler, had been to see him, not half an hour ago, with the intelligence that Miss Llewellyn had left the house the night before and not been home since. Mr. Sterndale, with his cynical ideas concerning women, had not paid much attention nor attached much importance to the man’s statement. He thought the quondam housekeeper of Grosvenor Square had found another place, or another lover, and no longer held herself responsible to the Earl or anybody else for what she might choose to do. He had told Warrender that he did not think there was any reason for alarm; that Miss Llewel-
lyn was quite old enough to take care of herself, and that she had probably gone to visit friends and spent the night with them. She would be sure to return for her boxes. The butler had not seemed satisfied.

“But, begging your pardon, sir, the maid who saw her last, Susie, says she was looking very ill, poor lady! She said she was going into the square for a breath of fresh air,
and it was past nine o'clock then. Susan and I waited up for Miss Llewellyn till twelve, and then I only lay down on the bench in the hall till four this morning. But she never came back; and, begging your pardon, sir, it's what Miss Llewellyn haven't never done, not since she's been under his lordship's protection."

"Ah, well, Warrender, she's got her orders to quit, you know, and I daresay she considers she can do as she likes, as, indeed, there's no reason she should not. She's a very obstinate young woman, or she would have left the house before now, and she's putting me to a great deal of inconvenience. Indeed, if she does not leave soon, she will compel me to exercise the authority vested in me by Lord Ilfracombe, and order her to pack up her boxes and go!"

The old servant looked troubled.

"I hope not, sir, I hope not. Perhaps it's not my place to say anything, but Miss Llewellyn has been a kind mistress to us all, and so much at home—there, there, I don't understand these things, of course, and what's for his lordship's good is for the good of all of us; but there's not a servant in the hall but will be sorry that poor Miss Llewellyn is to be the sufferer. She had a kind heart, poor thing, if any lady had."

"No doubt, Warrender, no doubt. No one denies that she has good qualities; but they have been exercised greatly to the detriment of the Earl. Young men will be young men; but there comes a time when such things must be put a stop to, and the time has come to stop this. You will have a legal mistress now—a lady of high birth, who will rule the house as it should be ruled. And the sooner you all forget that such a person as Miss Llewellyn existed, the better."

"Perhaps so, sir. But, meanwhile, what are we to do about this?"

"Do nothing at all. She will come back safe enough, you may depend upon that. And I will write to her to-morrow, and tell her she must fix a day for leaving the house. I want to put the workmen in as soon as possible."

"Very good, sir," said the butler, humbly, as he retired. But the next thing Mr. Sterndale did was to read the account in his Standard of Nell's attempt at suicide, and
the coincidence naturally struck him. It did not flurry him in the least. It only made the thought flash through his mind, what a fortunate thing it would be if it were true. He threw up his engagements for the day, and took his way at once to the river police station, to make all possible inquiries about the suicide. He did not hear much more than he had read, but the description of the woman’s figure and dress, together with the time the accident occurred, all tallied so wonderfully with the fact of Nell’s disappearance, that the solicitor considered that he had every reason to hope it might have been herself, who had thus most opportunely left the course clear for the happiness of Lord Ilfracombe and his bride. He seconded the efforts of the police to discover the truth, offering a handsome reward for the recovery of the body for identification. And when a week passed without its being found, or Miss Llewellyn returning to Grosvenor Square, he considered it his duty to institute a search amongst the property she had left behind, to see if he could find any clue to the mystery. He told the servants that he did so in order to try and find an address to send them after her to; but they all knew by this time that something had happened to their late mistress, and that it was unlikely they should ever see her again. And, to do them justice, there was very sincere sorrow in the servants’ hall at the idea. Mr. Sterndale would not allow anybody to assist him in his search. He ransacked poor Nell’s chests of drawers and wardrobe by himself—turned over her dainty dresses, and laced and embroidered stock of linen; opened all her workbags and boxes, her desk and blotting books, but found not a line to intimate she had entertained any idea of taking her own life.

“Pooh,” said Mr. Sterndale to himself, as he wiped the dew off his pale face, “I’ve been alarming myself for nothing. It’s another lover the jade will be looking after, and not a watery grave. People in their right mind don’t commit suicide, and she was as sane as I am. She has most probably sought shelter with Mr. Jack Portland, or some other of the Earl’s swell friends. I know she was universally admired, and there will be a rush to the bidding, as soon as it becomes known that she’s put up for sale. However,
these pretty things had better be put under lock and key till his lordship sends word how they are to be disposed of."

With that he came to the trinket case, which Nell had locked, and the key of which she had thrown out of the window.

"Halloa!" he thought, "What is this? Another work-box? No, I fancy it is the sort of article women keep their rings in. He gave her some beauties; but I don't suppose she has been such a fool as to leave them behind her."

He tried every key on a bunch he had found on the dressing-table, but none would fit. So, after a few attempts with another bunch from his own pocket, he took out his penknife, and pried the lock open. The first thing he saw, laid on the top of the rings, brooches, and bracelets, was Nell's pathetic message to her lover, "Good-by, my only love. I cannot live without you." Mr. Sterndale read it, and shivered like an aspen leaf. Had Nell's ghost stood by his side, he could not have been more alarmed and nervous. "Good-by, my only love. I cannot live without you," he muttered to himself, while he trembled anew, and glanced fearfully over his shoulder.

"So that must really have been her, and she has destroyed herself!" he thought. "I never really believed it would come to that, never! But it is Lord Ilfracombe's concern, not mine. It was he that drove her to it. I only acted on his orders, and I am bound to obey him if he tells me to do a thing. But who would have thought it was in her! She must have felt his marriage very much. I didn't believe it was in a woman to care for any man to such an extent. But, perhaps, after all, it was only the loss of her position, illegal as it was, that turned her a bit crazy. It can't be pleasant, after having enjoyed such a home as this, to go back to work. Yet she wouldn't take the money he offered her; a noble compensation! She didn't seem to think even that enough. Well, well! it is incomprehensible. All the female sex are! To think that she should have preferred death—death! But what am I saying? It may not have been Miss Llewellyn, after all! We have no proof! Doubtless it was some unfortunate who had come to the end of her tether. But it would never do to tell Lord Ilfra-
combe my suspicions—not yet, at all events, while he is on his wedding tour. Time enough when he has sobered down into a steady, married man; then, perhaps, the news will come rather as a relief from all fear of meeting the object of his youthful indiscretion again. Yet, under the water—that beautiful face and figure! It seems too terrible! I must not think of it. There is no reason it should trouble me in the very slightest degree."

Mr. Sterndale rung the bell at this juncture, and ordered the lady's maid who had waited upon Miss Llewellyn to have all her belongings properly packed and locked away, until his lordship's pleasure concerning them should be known. But the trinket box he put his own seal on and carried off to place in his safe with other property belonging to his client.

Yet Mr. Sterndale, try as he would, could not lock away with it all remembrance of the woman whom he firmly believed to be lying, stark and dead, beneath the water. His last interview with her kept on returning to his memory, and made him wretched. Her proud, flashing glances, her complete incredulity—and then, her bowed head and subdued voice, her attitude of utter despair, her silence, and her final accusation that her lover's determination had been brought about through his influence. It had, in a great measure, been so; he knew it, and had confessed as much to her. And so she had thought fit to end the matter. Very foolish, very rash, and decidedly unpleasant to think of. So he would put the remembrance away from him, at once and forever. He informed the servants that Miss Llewellyn had returned home to her own people, and that her things were to remain there until they received further orders. But none of them believed his story.

Meantime, Nell's complete disappearance, though apparently so mysterious, was, in reality, no mystery at all. Few things are when once unraveled. Her precipitate fall into the water had brought her head-downwards against the black side of an empty barge. The blow stunned her, and she was immediately sucked under and borne by the running current some way lower down, where her body rose under the bows of a rowing boat, whose owners were just preparing to shelve her on the mud bank which fringes
either side of the Thames. They were watermen of the lowest class, but honest and kindly hearted.

"Ullo, Jim!" cried one of them, as Nell's body rose along-side, "what's that? By Gawd! if it isn't a woman's 'and! Here, give us an 'and and lift 'er over! Quick now, will yer?"

"It's a corpus!" said Jim, shrinking back as most people do from contact with the dead. "Let it be, Garge! Don't bring it over here! It's no concern of ourn, and the perlice will find it soon enough! Row on, man, do, and leave it be'ind! The look of it's quite enough for me!"

"You're a nice 'un!" retorted Garge, as he leant over the boat's side and seized hold of Nell Llewellyn. "What d'ye mean? Would yer leave a poor gal to drown, when maybe she ain't 'alf dead? Here! Lend an 'and, will yer, or I'll knock yer bloomin' brains out with my oar!"

Thus admonished, Jim joined his forces to those of his comrade, and, by their united efforts, they hauled the body into the boat. As soon as Garge saw her lovely face, which looked almost unearthly in its beauty, he became eager to take her home to his mother, to be succored and taken care of.

"Now, Garge, mark what I'm saying of," argued Jim. "You 'ad better, by 'alf, take 'er to the station at once. 'Tain't no business of yourn, and you'll maybe get into trouble by taking it on yerself! She committed suicide, there's where it is, and you should leave 'er to the perlice. I thought I 'eard a lot o' shouting from the bridge jest now, and it was after this 'ere, you may take yer oath of it! A bad lot all round, and will bring you into trouble. Now be wise, and jest drop 'er into the water agin. She's as dead as a door nail!"

"That's yer opinion, is it?" said Garge, contemptuously, "and 'ow long 'ave you set up as a doctor, eh? Now, jest do as I tell yer, or I'll know the reason why. Lift 'er up by the petticoats, and I'll take 'er 'ead and shoulders. That's it; and now for mother's."

"Mother's" was the cellar floor of one of those tenements which abound on the river's side, and afford shelter for the "water-rats" who make their living on its bosom and its shores. The two young men had not far to carry their
A BANKRUPT HEART.

burden; but Nell was heavy, and they stumbled over the threshold of the house and down the cellar steps, and were glad enough to lay her dripping body on the floor.

"Hello! lads, what 'ave yer got there?" exclaimed an old woman, who came out of the Cimmerian darkness, carrying a tallow candle stuck in the neck of an old beer bottle. "Mercy me! not a corpus, surely? Why, what on airt made you bring it 'ere? A gal, too, and a purty one. Garge, tell me the right of it all, or I'll 'ave none of 'er 'ere."

"Theer ain't no rights, nor wrongs neither, mother," replied Garge, "only this body floated under our bows, and I don't believe the pore gal is dead; and no one knows better 'ow to rewive a corpus than you do, so we carried 'er 'ome to you at onst. She's a lady, and maybe a rich 'un, and you may git a good reward for rewiving 'er, from 'er friends. So wheer's the blankets, and the 'ot water? Yer've got some bilin' to make our tea, I know, and I'll go and call Mrs. Benson to 'elp yer with 'er."

"That's it, my lad," replied the mother, who, though most people would have designated her as a filthy hag, was a kind-hearted old body. "And Jim and you must make yerself scarce fer to-night, fer I can't do nothin' till yer two are gone. Take Garge 'ome with yer, Jim, and if this gal's too fur gone to do anything with, yer must give notice fust thing in the morning to the perlince, fer I can't keep a dead body 'ere longer than the morning."

"I don't believe as she is dead," said Garge, who had been bending over Nell's body, and listening with his ear upon her chest. "Yer can't deceive me much, yer know, mother, fer I've seen too many on 'em. 'Owever, I'll fatch Mrs. Benson at once, and I'll look in larst thing, to 'ear your news."

The old woman had lighted a fire by this time, and dragged the body in front of it; and, as soon as her neighbor joined her, they commenced rubbing and thumping, and chafing the limbs of the apparently drowned girl; and though their remedies were rough, they were successful; for, after some fifteen or twenty minutes of this treatment, Nell sighed deeply, gasped for breath, and finally opened her eyes, and looked at her good Samaritans. She at-
tempted to rise, but they held her down with their strong hands, and continued their original massage treatment with redoubled energy. At last, their patient ejaculated, “Where am I?” which is invariably the first question asked by a woman recovering from a fit of unconsciousness.

“Wheer are ye, honey?” repeated Garge’s mother. “Why, afore the fire, of course, and on the floor, which is rather a hard bed, I ’spect, fer one like yer; but we’d no better place to lay yer on.”

“But how did I come here?” said Nell; and then, as remembrance poured back upon her, she moaned: “Ah! the water, I remember, the water,” and closed her eyes again. But, as her strength returned more fully, she started to a sitting posture, and cried fiercely:

“Who brought me here? Who told you to do this? What right have you to interfere with me? I thought it would have been all over by this time, and now, it has all to come over again—all over again.”

“Oh no, it won’t, honey,” replied her companion. “You won’t go to do anything so foolish agin. Why, you’ve as near lost yer life as possible. It were jest touch and go with yer, wern’t it, Mrs. Benson?”

“That it were, indeed,” said that worthy.

“And you’re too fine a gal to throw yerself away in sich a fashion; yer should leave that sorter thing to the poor gutter drabs. My Garge ’e found yer, and brought yer ’ome, and I’ve no doubt you’ve fine friends as will be real glad to git yer back agin.”

“No, I haven’t. I have no friends,” said Nell.

“What! no father, nor mother!” exclaimed her hostess, “Pore gal. But I daresay you’ve got a young man; or, if yer ’aven’t, yer’ll git one. You’re much too fine a gal to go begging. And whatever made yer think of making an ’ole in the water puzzles me. Now, yer jest wrap this blanket right round yer, and drink this posset. ’Taint to yer taste, p’raps, but ’tis the best thing out to warm your blood arter a soaking.”

She held a filthy mug, filled with a filthy, but steaming, decoction of treacle and beer to Nell’s lips as she spoke, and the girl opened her mouth mechanically and took it all in. Then, sickened of life and everything in it, including
the treacle posset, she rolled herself in the blanket, and, with her face towards the fire, sunk into a sleep of exhaustion and despair. Garge, true to his trust, sneaked round at about midnight to ask what news there was of his patient, and was delighted, in his rough way, to hear that she had recovered.

"She is a beauty!" he exclaimed, as he gazed at her pale face, on which the light of the burning logs was playing— "a rale rare 'un, that's wot I thinks. Don't yer let that fire out afore the morning, mother, for she'll feel cold when she wakes, though it is so 'ot. And now, wasn't I wise to bring 'er 'ome, 'stead of the perlice station? I bet yer I'll make a pot of money over this, mother, 'stead of the coppers takin' it. Well, good-night, and don't yer let 'er go till I've seen 'er agin in the morning."

But long before Garge's mother had roused herself again, her visitor had gone. The old woman was tired with the exertions she had made on her behalf, and had taken just the smallest drop of gin to quiet her own perturbed feelings before she turned into bed. But soon Nell had started up from her short, feverish slumber and lain before the fire with wide-open eyes, staring at the flickering flames, and wondering what the next move of her unhappy life would be. The old woman's words rang in her ears: "What! no father, nor mother? Pore gal!" How ungrateful it had been of her not to remember that she had both father and mother, before she took the fatal plunge which might have separated her from them forever! Already she felt ashamed of her impetuosity and despair. She resolved, as she lay there, that she would go back to her parents and her home. She would return to Panty-cuckoo Farm and try to forget that she had ever left it. It would be sweet, she thought, feverishly, to smell the woodbine and the roses again—it would cool her brain to lie down on the dewy grass and press her hot cheek to the wild thyme and the daisies that bedecked it.

Her mind was still in a bewildered and chaotic state, or Nell would have dreaded the questions that awaited her at Panty-cuckoo Farm; but, luckily, it led her in the right direction. A sudden horror of the publicity she had courted by her rash act took possession of her, and she
panted to get up and away before the good Samaritans who had brought her back to life were able to gain any particulars regarding her name or former condition. With this desire strong upon her, Nell raised herself, weak as she was, and glanced at her surroundings. The logs still burnt brightly on the hearth—the old woman snored mellifluously on a pallet in the corner—for the rest, she was alone. The clothes they had taken off her were hung out to dry on a chair. Nell felt them. They were fit to put on again. She raised herself gently and resumed her attire, which consisted of a dark print dress, a black mantle, and a large straw hat, which had not become detached from her head when she went under the water. But she could not go without leaving some token of her gratitude behind her. She felt in the pocket of her dress. Her purse was still there, and it contained several pounds. Nell took out two, and, wrapping them in a piece of paper, placed them in a conspicuous position on the chair. Then she crept softly across the cellar, and, climbing the stone steps that led to the entrance of the tenement, found, to her relief, that the outer door was ajar. There were too many people in the house, and they were of too lawless a kind, for any one to notice her departure, or think it singular if they had. The dawn was just breaking as Nell stepped into the open air; and, though she knew she must look very forlorn, the few wayfarers whom she encountered looked more forlorn still, and no one molested or questioned her. She found she had sufficient money to take her straight away to Usk, had she so desired; but she dared not present herself before her people in her present draggled state. So she went into a little lodging in the Waterloo road, where she was confident that no one would recognize her; and, after staying two nights there, she had so far remedied the state of her wardrobe as to feel able to go back to Wales without exciting too much inquiry. But, still, Nell was far from being in her normal condition, and moved and spoke like a woman in a dream.
CHAPTER VII.

When visitors went for the first time to Usk, and their hostesses wished to imbue them with a sense of the beauties of the place, they generally said: "O let us drive to Panty-cuckoo Farm. You must not leave Usk without seeing Panty-cuckoo Farm. The sweetest, most picturesque old place you ever set eyes on; quite a leaf out of the past ages. Sir Archibald Bowmant says it dates from the fourteenth century. And Mrs. Llewellyn is such a quaint old woman. You don't meet with such people in her class nowadays. We always have our eggs, and butter, and pork from her; and she will give us a lovely cup of tea, with the best of cream. You must come.”

And the visitors usually agreed that their hostess' description of the farm and its inhabitants had not been exaggerated, and came back delighted with what they had seen. They drove for some way out of the town of Usk, along an undulating road, almost overshadowed by the meeting branches of lofty elm and oak trees, and fringed by hedges, fragrant at this time of year with meadow-sweet, and climbing travelers' joy, and wild roses. A sudden curve in the road brought them to a wide, white gate, which led by a most precipitous pathway to the farm-house. On either side this pathway were placed large whitewashed blocks of stone, to enable the wheels of cart or carriage to keep from rolling into the little trench by which it was bordered. On one side the trench, or ditch, was a large orchard, stretching away beyond where the eye could reach, and well stocked with apple, and pear, and cherry trees. Beneath their shade were numerous coops of hens, with their broods of little white chickens scattered round them like fallen blossoms of May; and, flying like the wind at their mother's call, the black porkers, for which Farmer Llewellyn was famous, came grunting behind each other, eating the windfalls, and turning the refuse over with their ringed snouts. Opposite to the orchard was a plot of grass
which ran along the side of the house, and was decorated by garden beds, filled with carnations, lilies, mignonette, geraniums, and such common, sweet-smelling flowers. This part of the house had been built subsequently to the original portion, and had a side entrance of its own, beneath a little porch covered with honeysuckle and clematis. It consisted of only two rooms; and, as the farmer's family had never consisted of more than his two daughters, Mrs. Llewellyn had been in the habit of letting these rooms to casual visitors to Usk, who required a lodging for a few nights. Especially had they been at the service of Sir Archibald Bowmant during the shooting season, as he often had more bachelors staying at Usk Hall than he could accommodate, and knew he could trust their comfort, with safety, to his old tenant, Mrs. Llewellyn. Sir Archibald's woods skirted the road opposite Panty-cuckoo Farm, so that his guests had only to cross the park to gain their nightly lodgings; and so much trust had Mrs. Llewellyn in her landlord's visitors, that, when her rooms were occupied, she let the young gentlemen come and go as they liked, without holding any inquisitorial espionage over their proceedings. But this wing of the house had nothing to do with the farm itself. Visitors to the Llewellyns drove straight down the precipitous drive, till they turned round at the foot to face the front of the farm-house, which consisted of a low, rambling building, of dark-red brick, with a thatched roof. Before it was a prim, old-fashioned strip of ground, guarded by a row of eight box trees, cut in the shape of peacocks. On the walls of the house were a magnificent magnolia, and some plants of the crimson pyrus japonica, which gave it a wonderfully warm appearance. As soon as carriage wheels were heard, Mrs. Llewellyn usually opened the door, and came down the bricked path to welcome her visitors. She would never hear of their leaving before they had partaken of her tea and cream. The parlor was entered immediately from the front door, and was wainscoted halfway to the ceiling with rich, dark oak, of which the ceiling itself was formed, divided into squares, with a plain but different device carved in each. The windows of this room were lattice-paned, and contained window seats in the shape of oak settles, which opened like boxes, to store the
house linen. The fireplace was a mass of carving, without any mantel-piece, but a wide range below for logs, and iron dogs on either side to support them. Mrs. Llewellyn much prided herself on this parlor. She knew the value and beauty of it as much as anybody, though she sometimes grumbled at its inconveniences, and said she would exchange it, any day, for a modern-built house. It opened into a wide, bricked passage, or ante-room, where the farmer hung his coats, and a table stood piled with the prayer books of the family, ready to be distributed when church-time came round again.

Nell's still lay amongst them. Her mother often sighed when she accidentally touched it—sometimes she had been seen to raise it furtively to her lips before she laid it down again. It was outside this ante-chamber that the two rooms had been added that were occasionally let as lodgings, and the door which originally had opened from it to the garden now led to them. Visitors passed through it to the dairy, where the shelves were piled with the year's cheeses, and marble slabs held the mounds of fresh butter, waiting to be made into rolls or pats by the rosy-cheeked dairymaid, and the pans were standing covered with thick, rich yellow cream, such as Mrs. Llewellyn was famed for all the country side. This dairy led across a covered-in yard to the baking-house, and in the center of the yard stood a well, centuries old, with an Elizabethan cross surmounting its quaint arched roof. In fact, there was no end to the curiosities in Panty-cuckoo Farm; and ladies with purses full of money had tried over and over again to induce the farmer and his wife to part with some of their bits of blue china and yellow lace, and old wood carving, that they might carry them back to adorn their drawing-rooms in Kensington or Westminster. But the Llewellyns were steadfast in their courteous refusals. No amount of coin would have made them sell the little relics that adorned their rooms and had come down to them from unknown ancestors. They would as soon have sold their own flesh and blood. There was something about these people above the general run of farmers and their wives. Countrified they necessarily were, but not vulgar nor common; and, even in the lowly position they occupied, they managed to infuse so much dignity,
that even their superiors recognized it and met it with respect. It was rather an important occasion with Mrs. Llewellyn when we were first introduced to her, for her daughter Hetty was coming, with her husband and several of her new relations, to take tea at Panty-cuckoo Farm for the first time since her return from London, and her mother was eager to do her honor. Mrs. Llewellyn had evidently been a very handsome woman in her youth; and as she moved about her rooms, clad in her gala dress of gray merino, with a white muslin handkerchief pinned across her bosom, and a large cap covering her iron-gray hair, it was evident from whom poor Nell had inherited the beauty that had proven such a misfortune to her. Tall and upright, with a fresh color in her face, and her hazel eyes beaming with expectation and pride in her table, Mrs. Llewellyn looked quite a picture as she moved about her room and arranged the feast for her expected guests. The brown bread and fresh butter, the cream and new-laid eggs, the honeycomb and home-made preserves, the cut ham and watercresses, made up a picture of beauty that any housewife might have been proud of; and Farmer Llewellyn chuckled with satisfaction as he sat in one of the window settles and watched the tempting display.

"That's right, wife!" he exclaimed, "stuff them well. You'll get more friends through their stomachs than you'll ever do through their hearts."

"O Griffith!" she replied, "that's a poor way of looking at it; not but what a good meal's a good thing, after all; but I shouldn't like the Owens to go home and say they hadn't had enough to eat! And it's our Hetty's first visit, too," and here Mrs. Llewellyn heaved a deep sigh.

"What's up now?" said her husband. "You can't expect to keep your girls with you forever, you know, Mary, and William Owen is as good a lad as ever stepped in shoe leather, and will keep our Hetty well. We might have gone further and fared worse for a husband for her, Mary!"

"O yes, I know that, father, and I'm quite satisfied. I like Will myself. He's like a son to me. No, I wasn't thinking of Hetty at all, but of our Nell! I've been thinking of her a deal lately. I don't seem as if I could get her
out of my mind. It seems so hard that Hetty should see her and not I. Five years is a long time not to set eyes on one's own child! Sometimes the longing for a sight of her is so bad, I feel as if I must go up to London, if I walk every step of the way."

"O that's the way the crow flies!" chuckled the farmer. "You're jealous of your daughter, are you? You'll be worrying me to take you on a second honeymoon tour next. You want to see London town now."

"O Griff, how I wish I could!—not for the sake of the sights, you know. The only sight I want is that of my girl. If I had ever thought that servants were such slaves up there, I'd have cut her legs off before she should have left Usk. My pretty Nell! If she goes and marries away from me, where, perhaps, I may never have a glimpse of her or her little ones, it would drive me crazy."

"Come now, mistress!" exclaimed the farmer, in his old-fashioned way, "you must just put off your fit of the mopes for a bit, for here are all your guests coming down the dell in their wedding bravery. Here's Hetty, blooming like a rose, and trying to look as if nobody had ever been married in the world before her. How are you, my little bride, and how are you, William, my lad? Mind the step, Mrs. Owen, ma'am, for it's broken at the edge. (You mind me to have that set right, Mary!) Well, farmer, you look famous, and so does Hugh here! I went to hear you spouting last Sunday night, lad, and you have the gift of the gab, and no mistake! You made my wife, here, cry. You hit so neatly on her favorite sins!"

"O no, Hugh, you won't believe that, I hope," cried Mrs. Llewellyn, blushing like one of her own daughters; "father's only chaffing you. It was looking at you and thinking of my Nell that made me cry. The sight of you brings back the time so plain, when you and she used to play and quarrel all day long. You were main sweet on her then, and used to call her your little wife. Aye! but how glad I should be if she had stayed at home like my Hetty, and married in Usk. My heart is very sore, sometimes, when I think of her so far away, and I not near her, in sickness or trouble. Sometimes I fancy I'll never set eyes on her again."
"O mother, you mustn't say that," interposed Hetty, "for Nell promised Will and me, that as soon as ever she got a holiday, she should come back to see us all at Usk. But Lord Ilfracombe has gone abroad, and left her in charge of everything; so she can't possibly leave the house just yet."

"In charge of everything! Doesn't that seem strange?" said the mother, with a proud smile. "My careless Nell. Lord Ilfracombe must think a deal of her to trust her like that."

"O he does think a deal of her, mother. Any one could see that. He must give her heaps and heaps of money. You should have seen how she was dressed. O lovely! And her hair was done just like a lady's; and when we had tea with her, the footman waited on us as if we had been the owners of the house, and he brought the tea up on a beautiful silver tray, and we sat in the best room, and it was like fairyland. Wasn't it, Will?"

"I hope Nell did not do anything she ought not," remarked the prudent mother. "I hope she won't get into a scrape for this."

"Just what I said," laughed Hetty; "but Nell said Lord Ilfracombe is so good-natured, that if he came back, sudden-like, he'd only smile, and say: 'That's right; go on and enjoy yourselves.' And a little gentleman, who came and spoke to us when we were at the play, and sent us, O the most beautiful ices, talked as if Lord Ilfracombe thought all the world of our Nell. Didn't he, Will?"

"Aye! that's so," acquiesced Will.

The farmer and his wife, all unconscious of wrong, rather bridled at this information; but Hugh Owen looked grave, and his dark eyes seemed to question eagerly for more. This last was rather a remarkable young man, both outwardly and inwardly. From a child he had been a student, and now might almost have been termed a scholar, though a self-taught one. His face was so earnest and introspective in its expression, that it made one forget that his features were not strictly handsome. His sallow complexion, dark gray eyes, large nose, and thin-lipped mouth, were far less attractive than his younger brother's fair skin, and Saxon characteristics; but no one looked twice at William
Owen, while few could forget Hugh. His tall, gaunt frame, nervous hands, and straight hair, all told the same tale; of a man who had used his intellect more than his muscle, and cared for his brains before his body. From a child Hugh Owen had felt the power within him, and had delighted to mount a rostrum of his own erection, and hold forth to his playmates on any subject which occupied his mind at the moment. As he grew into a lad, he scorned farm work, and only wanted to be left alone with his book and studies, until his father, not knowing what to make of him, and fearing he was "daft," consulted the minister about him. This minister was a Wesleyan; an earnest, devout man, though rather unlearned; who saw in young Owen's proclivities only a "call" to the ministry, and persuaded his proud parents to send him to school at Newport, whence, after several years of study, he returned to Usk, and was elected to take part in the services of the dissenting chapel. But, added to his ministerial duties, Hugh Owen had taken to preaching at the corners of the by-roads and on the common, or wherever he could collect an audience or obtain a hearing. Some people said he was mad; others, that he was a saint. His parents and friends thought the latter; but he was only a young enthusiast, whose whole heart, and soul-mind were filled with one idea, with which he panted to imbue the whole world. As Hetty chattered about Nell, and what she had done and said in London, Hugh's eyes became strained and anxious, and his attention was wholly enchained.

"I never heard before," he said, presently, "of maid servants drinking their tea off silver trays and sitting in the best rooms."

"That's only because you don't know anything of London life," cried Hetty, tossing her little head. "Nell says it's quite different from country, and any one can see so for themselves. Why, the gentleman who met us at the play (I forget his name) spoke to our Nell just as if she was a lady, and took off his hat when we drove away in the cab, as if we were duchesses. O it was lovely! I wish we lived in London always."

"You've had quite enough of town life for awhile, my lass," observed her father—"you're head would be turned
with much more. You'll be expecting mother to give you your tea on a silver tray next!"

"O never mind the tray," exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn, impatiently; "if it had been of gold it couldn't have been too good for our Nell! But tell me how she looked, Hetty! Is she quite well and bonny? Does she seem happy in this grand place? Does she have plenty to eat, or did you see any signs of fretting after the old home in my girl? for, if so, I'll have her back—aye, if she was housekeeper to twenty lords or the Prince of Wales himself, God bless him!"

"O no, mother, don't you worry! Nell is as happy as happy can be, I'm sure of that. Of course she'd like to come home for a bit. I could see the tears in her eyes when she spoke of you and father—"

"God bless my lass!" cried her mother, interrupting her; "when you say that, I feel as if I couldn't rest another night without she came home. What a pretty thing she was at sixteen—you remember her, Hugh, with her light hair streaming down her back and her eyes dancing with fun and mischief! The prettiest lass in all Usk or for miles around—everybody said so! Didn't they, Hugh?"

"Yes, Mrs. Llewellyn, you are right! They did so," replied Hugh.

"A bit wild and willful-like, but no harm in her," continued the mother, "and might have married well if she had stayed here. Well, I miss her sorely and always have done so, and I shall all the more, now that Hetty's gone and got married. I've never seen the girl that was a patch on my Nell!"

"Now, mother, suppose you stop your bemoanings and pass round the griddle cakes," interposed the farmer. "I don't call it much of a compliment to William and Hetty here for you to amuse us with praises of our Nell. You heard what Het says: that she means to come to Usk the first holiday she gets, and what do you want more? She might have married and gone out to Ameriky, and then you'd have had to do without her altogether!"

"God forbid!" said his wife, as she busied herself with looking after her guests.

They were soon started on another subject. Farmer Owen had had an uncommonly heavy crop of hay that year,
and as most husbandmen had lost theirs through the
drought, his good luck and the way he had secured it
formed a grand subject of conversation between him and
Mr. Llewellyn. The little bride had not half exhausted her
tales of the wonders she had been introduced to in London,
and they were all in full chatter, asking questions and an-
swering them, when Hugh Owen said, suddenly:

“Who’s this coming down the glen?”

All eyes were instantly directed toward the steep hill
which led to the farm-house, and down which a tall female
figure was walking with rather slow footsteps.

“It’s a lady!” quoth Mrs. Llewellyn, wonderingly.

“Whoever can she be? It’s a stranger!” I’ve never seen
her in Usk before!”

The woman was dressed very plainly, but she seemed to
wear her clothes differently from the common herd. She
raised her head every now and then, expectantly, and yet
timidly, and during one of these movements Hetty caught
sight of her face.

“Mother!” she screamed, as she jumped up from her
seat, “it’s our Nell!”

“Nell!” echoed her mother. “Never!”

But Hetty had already left the house, and, meeting the
advancing figure, had thrown both her arms around it.

“Nell! Nell!” she cried. “O Nell! we were just talk-
ing of you! What joy it is to welcome you home!”

She seized her two hands and dragged her along till she
stood in the midst of the astonished group.

“Mother, can’t you see? It is our Nell. She has got
her holiday at last, and has come to spend it with us.”

“Yes, at last,” exclaimed Nell, as she fell into her
mother’s opened arms. “Mother, I’ve come home, and I
never mean to leave you again.”

At first, in their delight and surprise at her unexpected
appearance, they could do nothing but kiss her, and gaze
at her; but, when their excitement had somewhat subsided,
all their anxiety was to hear why Nell had not given them
warning of her return, and when she was going back to her
situation again.

“Going back,” she echoed, with a shrill laugh; “I’m

never going back at all, mother. I’m going to live with
you now, and help you, as Hetty used to do. I shall never go back, unless you tell me you don’t want me.”

Her mother’s only answer was to cry over her, and say how much she had longed for her return; but Hetty was gazing at her sister with amazement. What had happened to her since they had parted in London? Nell was as pale as death; she almost looked thinner than when she had seen her last; her eyes were abnormally large, and there were dark lines under them. Above all, there was a harsh shrillness in her voice which she had not noticed before.

“My darling lass,” said Mrs. Llewellyn, “if you wait till your father and I bid you go, you’ll stay here forever. But have you been ailing, Nell?’ Hetty, here, said you were looking so well, but you don’t look so to me. London air can’t agree with you, to leave your cheeks so white and your lips so pale. Are you sure you are quite well, my lass? If not, your mother will nurse you till you are. She hasn’t lost much of her good looks, has she, Hugh?”

“Who’s that?” said Nell, turning round. “What! my old sweetheart? How are you, Hugh? How are you, Mrs. Owen? I didn’t know mother had a tea party, you see, or I would come to-morrow, instead of to-day.”

Then she suddenly burst into a wild fit of laughter.

“Isn’t it funny to be sitting amongst you all again? I feel as if I had never left home. Ah! it’s a long time ago, isn’t it, mother? A long, weary while. But it’s over now, thank God; over for good and all. I mean to stay at dear Panty-cuckoo Farm for the rest of my life, and look after the dairy, and the baking, and the washing, and let dear mother sit down and rest. You’ll think I’ve forgotten all about it, mother, but you’ll find you’re mistaken. In two or three days I shall have forgotten that I ever left Usk, and be as good a farm maid as ever.”

“O Nell, my girl, you know how glad I shall be to have your help; but what made you think of coming home to give it me? I’m fairly puzzled what put it in your mind. Hetty understood you weren’t likely to get leave for a long time to come.”

“What put it in my mind?” repeated Nell, with a repetition of her shrill laugh; “why, Hetty, to be sure. She drew such a pitiful picture of mother, left without a
daughter to help in her dairy work, that I couldn’t resist
the temptation to run home, and give you all a surprise.
Aren’t you glad to see me, father? Your bonny girl, as
you used to call me. I remember you were vexed enough
when I decided to go out to service. You threatened to
lock me up on bread and water.”

“Glad to have you back, lass? Aye! more glad than I
can say. But I confess you’ve taken us rather by surprise.
What did your master say to your leaving him in such a
hurry? Wasn’t he a bit put out? Hetty said he had left
you in charge of the house.”

Nell flushed suddenly, like a scarlet rose.

“So he did; but he’s altered his plans, and isn’t coming
home now for a long time. And so, as a servant isn’t a
slave, I’ve given him warning. He told me in his last let-
ter I could leave London when I liked; and I liked to do
so, now—now, at once. I couldn’t stay. I wanted my
mother. I wanted Panty-cuckoo Farm. I wanted you all
—and rest, rest.”

She uttered the last words almost like a sigh. As they
escaped her lips, she turned, and caught Hugh Owen’s eyes
fixed on her. Nell threw back her head defiantly, as
though she dared him to guess at anything she thought, or
felt.

“Rest,” said Mrs. Llewellyn, sympathizingly; “of course
you want rest, my poor child, and you shall have it here.
They’ve worked you too hard in London. I was afraid of
it when I heard what Hetty had to tell me about you. But
you shall rest now, my bonny lass, you shall rest now.”
CHAPTER VIII.

Farmer Owen was considered quite a proficient on the violin in Usk, and as soon as the party (with the exception of Nell) had discussed the good things provided for them, he drew his instrument from its green baize case, and proceeded to play a plaintive ballad. His friends listened with respectful attention, but the melancholy strain was too much for Nell's overstrung nerves.

"O give us something livelier, Mr. Owen, do!" she cried, jumping up from her seat. "'Robin Adair' is enough to give one the blues! Let's have a dance, instead. Here, Hetty! help me wheel the table into the corner, and we'll stand up for a good old country reel. Did I tell you that Lord Ilfracombe is married? We'll dance in honor of the wedding!"

"The Earl married!" exclaimed her sister, standing still in her amazement. "Why, Nell, when did that happen? Wasn't it very sudden? You said nothing about it when we were in London."

"O it seems he had been thinking of it for a long while; but gentlemen don't tell their secrets to their servants, you know. They take the responsibility and trouble and expense, and all the servants have to do is to smile and look happy, and dance at the wedding. Come along, Hugh," she continued, pulling that young man by the arm, "you shall be my partner. Hetty and Will must open the ball, of course, but we'll show them how to dance at it. Up the middle and down again, hands across and turn your partner, as we used in the days gone by. That's right, Mr. Owen, give us 'Yankee Doodle.' That's the tune to make one's feet fly. Now, Hugh!"

She was dragging at his arm as hard as she could to make him rise from his seat, and she looked so beautiful with her flushed cheeks and disordered hair that he found it hard to resist her.

"But, Nell—Miss Llewellyn," he remonstrated, shyly,
"you forget—I cannot—it would not be seemly for me, in
my character as minister, to dance. I have not done such a
thing for years, and I shall never do it again."

Nell regarded him for a moment with grave surprise, and
then, with a hard laugh, flung his hand away from her.

"You stupid! Do you really mean it? So much the
worse for you! I shall dance with my dad, then! He
won't refuse me, will you, daddy? You'll have a fling
with your girl in honor of her master's wedding."

And she pulled the old farmer into the middle of the
room as she spoke, whilst he, well pleased at her
audacity and good spirits, allowed himself to be turned and twisted
at the will of his handsome daughter, who flew up and
down the dance as if she had never a care or a sorrow in
her life.

Hugh Owen sat by and watched her with troubled,
anxious eyes. He almost regretted at that moment that his
chosen vocation forbade his joining in the festivities before
him. He would have given a good deal to have had his arm
round his old sweetheart's waist, and danced hand in hand
with her to the merry tune his father played with so much
spirit. Mrs. Llewellyn, though still on hospitable cares
intent, and engaged at the sideboard with currant and
orange wine and queen cakes, was delighted to watch the
antics of her daughter, as they beat time with their flying
feet to the strains of "Yankee Doodle"; but her pleasure
was somewhat tempered by anxiety lest Nell should fatigue
herself too much after her long journey.

"There, there, my lass!" she remonstrated, as she heard
her urging Mr. Owen to play them another country dance;
"you mustn't forget you have come off a tiring jour-
ney, and haven't eaten a morsel since you entered the house.
You ought to be in bed, my Nell, instead of cutting such
jinks. I shall have you ill to-morrow if you don't take
care."

"Ill? Tired?" cried Nell, "Fiddle-de-dee, mother! No
such thing! I shall be up at cock-crow to see after the
hens and chickens, or to have a ride on Kitty. How's the
dear old mare, father?"

"Old Kitty, my lass!" replied Farmer Llewellyn; "why,
she's been dead the best part of a year. Surely, your mother
or Hetty told you that. You must have forgotten it, Nell!”

A shade came over the young woman’s laughing face.

“Old Kitty dead,” she murmured, in a subdued voice. “Dear old Kitty, that I used to ride astride when I was in short frocks. O I am sorry. No one told me, I am sure. I couldn’t have forgotten it. I loved old Kitty so well. She was part of home to me.”

“Ah! my girl,” said her father, “if the old mare is the only thing you’ve forgotten in Usk, you’ve no call to blame yourself. I’ve been sometimes afraid that your grand ways and friends up in London might make you too fine for Panty-cuckoo Farm; but it don’t seem so now. They’ve made a lady of you, Nell, but not too fine a one to forget the old folks at home; thank God for that. You won’t look down on your mother and sister because their ways of speaking are not so grand as what you’ve been accustomed to hear; nor despise them and the old farm if we can’t give you as many luxuries as you got up in your fine place in London?”

“Despise them? Look down on them?” echoed Nell. “O dad, you don’t know what you’re talking of. It is London that I hate and despise, and look down upon. It is the people there who are false, and cold, and cruel. I want to forget it all. I want to forget I ever went there. I hate service; it is degrading and despicable; and, O so lonely, to be far away from home, and mother and you. When I heard Hetty speak of you both, I could stand it no longer. I was obliged to come straight back to you all again.”

“And now we’ve got you, we shan’t let you go again in a hurry, Nell. You must stay, and be the comfort of our old age. But you had better be handing round your wine and cakes, wife. It’s getting on for ten o’clock, and our friends here have a matter of a couple o’ miles to walk to Dale Farm. I’ll have the mare put in the cart in two minutes, farmer, and drive you home myself, if you’ll only say the word.”

“Not for us, sir,” replied Owen. “My missus here likes a walk; and, as for the young ’uns, it does them good. Come on, Hetty. You’ll be main proud and happy, now you’ve got your sister back again, and I expect we shall
have a job to keep you at Dale Farm. There'll be a message, or a summat for Panty-cuckoo, most days of the week, I know."

Meanwhile, Hugh Owen had drawn near to Nell Llewellyn.

"I am glad to find you haven't quite forgotten me," he said, as he held her hand; "and I hope you will let me come sometimes and pay you a visit at Panty-cuckoo Farm, as I used to do."

"Why, surely. You are often here, with Hetty and Will, I suppose."

"Not often. My duties take up so much of my time. But sometimes I have an hour to spend in the evening, and I shouldn't like to let our friendship drop, now it has been renewed. Are you fond of reading?"

"It depends on what I have to read. I'm not over fond of sermons, such as you used to give me in the old days, Hugh."

The young man colored.

"Used I to give you sermons? It must have been very presumptuous of me. I will promise to give you no more; at least, in private. But I have a very fair library of books, and they are all at your service, if you should require them."

"Thank you. I will tell you if I should want something to amuse me; but, for the present, I shall be too busy helping mother, and getting my hand in for dairy and laundry work."

"You will never come back to that now. You have grown above it," replied the young man, gazing admiringly at her smooth, pallid complexion, and white hands.

"What do you know about it?" said Nell, curtly. "Don't bet against me, Hugh, or you'll lose your money. Good-night! Mother says you preach out in the fields, and some day I'll come with her to hear you, just for old times' sake. But if you're very prosy I shall walk straight home again; so I give you fair warning."

"Only tell me when you're coming, and I'll not be prosy," cried Hugh, eagerly.

The rest of the party had put on their wraps by this time, and were prepared to start. Hetty wound her arm
around her sister's waist, and they walked together up the steep incline to the wide, white gate, where the Dale Farm people joined forces, and set out for home. Nell stood in the moonlight, gazing after them till they had disappeared round the turning of the road, and then retraced her footsteps. As she found herself alone in the white moonlight, with only the solitude and the silence, all the forced gaiety she had maintained throughout the evening deserted her, and she staggered and caught at the slender trunk of an apple tree to prevent herself from falling.

"O my God! my God!" she prayed, "how shall I bear it?"

Her eyes were strained to the starry sky—her face looked ghastly in the moonlight—her frame trembled as if she could not support herself. She might have remained thus for an indefinite time had she not been roused by the sound of her mother's voice, calling her from the farm-house door.

"Nell, my lass, where are you? Come in, quick, there's a dear! You will catch a chill, standing out there with naught on."

She was hungering, poor mother! to take her stray lamb back to her bosom and have her all to herself. She had seen with concern that Nell had neither eaten nor drank since she had returned home, and she feared the effect of the excitement on her health. At the sound of her appeal, Nell came slowly down the dell again and entered the sitting-room.

"Now, my lass," said Mrs. Llewellyn, "you must just sit down here on the old settle, and eat and drink a bit. I'm afraid our fare seems different from what you've been accustomed to in London, but you'll soon relish it again. London folks haven't the appetites of country people, so they're obliged to coax their stomachs; but you'll take this junket, I'm sure, and a glass of wine, just to please your mother."

And as she sat her on the settle and pressed the dainties on her, Nell felt constrained to eat them, though they tasted like leather in her mouth. Now that the excitement was over, her white, strained looks and hollow cheeks went to her mother's heart.
“Aye,” she said, complainingly, “but you are thin and pale, my lass! I haven’t had time to see you rightly till now. Why, you’re shaking like an aspen! Have you been ill, Nell, or is this the effects of London?”

“No, indeed, I am not ill,” returned Nell, with quivering lips; “only rather tired after my journey, and maybe the excitement of coming to my dear old home. I think I had better go to bed now. I have taken you terribly by surprise, but I’m sure you’ll find a bed for me somewhere, mother.”

“Find a bed for you, darling!” said Mrs. Llewellyn, “why, your father and I would turn out of our own, sooner than you shouldn’t lie easy the first night you come back to us. But your own room is ready for you, Nell. No one has slept in it since you went away, not even Hetty, and Martha has been setting it to rights for you all the evening. Will you come, my dear, for you look ready to drop with fatigue?”

Nell was only too glad to accept the offer, and Mrs. Llewellyn conducted her up-stairs, and undressed her and put her to bed with all the tenderness and solicitude she had shown in performing the same offices when she was a little child. Is there ever a time when a mother ceases to regard the creature she has brought into the world as other than a child? He may be a bearded man, the father of a family or the hero of a nation, or she may be a weary and harassed woman, full of care and anxieties—but to their mothers they are always children to be looked after, loved and cared for. There is no position in which maternal love shines more brightly than when the infant she has nourished at her breast is returned upon her hands—a man or woman, perhaps in middle age, but weak, ill, helpless and requiring a mother’s care. She may mourn the necessity, but how she revels in having her baby back again, as dependent on her as when he or she had not yet begun to walk! Who would nurse him and watch him, and know neither fatigue nor privation for his sake as she can do? Happy those who have a mother to fly to when they are ill or miserable! Mrs. Llewellyn smoothed out Nell’s luxuriant braids of hair, reveling in their beauty, and put her best night-dress on her, and laid her between the snow-white
sheets, as if she had been four years old, instead of four and twenty. But this latter necessity brought an awkward question in its train—where had Nell left her own things? Had she brought them with her and deposited them at the railway station, or were they to follow her from London? At first the girl was silent: she did not know what to say. The awkwardness of the situation had not struck her before. Her face blanched still paler, and her mother saw she had introduced an embarrassing subject. Nell had turned round on her pillow and hidden her face from view.

"Never mind thinking about it to-night, my dear," said Mrs. Llewellyn, kindly; "you're too tired. Try and go to sleep, Nell, and you can tell me everything to-morrow."

"Yes," murmured Nell, with her face still hidden, "you shall hear all about it to-morrow. I have no box with me, mother. I—I got into a little scrape—debt, you know—and I had to part with my clothes. You won't be angry with me?"

"Angry with you, my dear? Don't get any foolish notions like that into your head! If you sold your things to pay your debt, it was an honest thing to do; and we'd be the last, father and I, to blame you for it. And we've got enough money in the stocking to buy you more. So set your mind at rest about that, my girl; and now go to sleep and wake bright to-morrow."

She kissed her daughter as she spoke, and went back to the parlor to rejoin her husband. But the first words the farmer uttered fanned the little breath of suspicion which she had entertained about Nell's sudden coming home into a flame.

"Well, how is she?" demanded Llewellyn, as his wife entered the parlor.

"O well enough, Griffith," she replied; "very tired, as you may have seen, and a bit inclined to be hysterical, but that'll all wear off by to-morrow."

"I hope it may," said the farmer; "but I don't quite understand why she came home without giving us the least warning. It seems queer, now doesn't it? Here was the girl in a first-class place, drawing big wages, as Hetty said she must, from the lavish way in which she spent money
whilst they were in town, and, without a word or warning, she chucks it all up and rushes home to us."

"Well, father, you wouldn't be the one to blame her for that, surely."

"Not I, if she'd done it in a decent way. Haven't I asked her a dozen times since she left us to come home if she felt inclined? But big situations ain't thrown up in that way, Mary. Servants have to give a month's notice before they leave. Has she left Lord Ilfracombe's service before he has got some one to fill her place? There's something I don't understand about it all, and I wish Nell had come back in a more regular manner. Where's her boxes and things? Has she left them in London or brought them with her? And, if so, why didn't she bring them on in Johnson's fly, or ask me to send Bob with the cart to fetch them?"

At this query Mrs. Llewellyn almost began to cry.

"O Griffith, my man! you mustn't be hard on the lass; but she hasn't got anything with her. No box nor nothing—only the clothes she stands upright in. She has just told me so."

"What! from a situation like Lord Ilfracombe's?" exclaimed the farmer. "What has she done with them, then? There's some mystery about all this that I don't like, Mary, and I mean to get to the bottom of it!"

"There's no mystery, Griffith, only a misfortune. Nell has told me all about it. I think she must have spent more than she could afford—perhaps on her sister when she was in London—anyway, our Nell got in debt and sold her things to pay it. It was very unfortunate, but it was honorable, you see. And she is but a girl, after all. We mustn't judge her too hardly. She didn't know how much she owed, perhaps, or she thought she'd make it up from her wages; and then this marriage took place, and she left, and found herself in a fix. It seems very plain to me."

"But why should she leave when his lordship got married? He'll want a housekeeper just the same. And likely would have raised Nell's wages. It was the very time for her to stay on."

"Ah, well, father, she longed to see us all again; you heard the dear lass say so, and you'd be the last to blame her for that, I'm sure."
"Of course," replied her husband. "No one is better pleased to have the girl back than I am, but I wish it had been all straight and above board and with no mystery about it; for I'd lay my life you haven't got at the bottom of it yet, wife, nor ever will, if the jade don't mean you to. You don't know the tricks they learns them up in London. Well, now she's come back, she stays. I won't have no more London, and no more mysteries. She's welcome back as the flowers in May, but I wish she'd told the whole truth about it."
CHAPTER IX.

Nell slept only by snatches through that night, and waked the next morning with a heart of lead in her bosom. She had been so long unused to country sights and sounds that she opened her eyes with the first gleam of sunshine that streamed through her window. The air was so pure, and the surroundings so peaceful, that she could hear the gardeners whetting their scythes in Sir Archibald Bowmant's grounds, and the milkers whistling or talking to each other, as they took their way to the cowsheds. A lark was executing his wonderful, untaught thrills far up somewhere in the blue heavens, and the farm-yard chorus had commenced to tune up—hens clucking; ducks quacking; pigs grunting; and cows lowing, as they asked to be delivered of their burden of milk. The honeysuckle and roses, which clambered outside her window and tapped against the panes, were filling the morning air with their fragrance; the dew-laden grass sent forth a sweet, faint odor; the smell of ripening fruit and ripened vegetables permeated the air. These were the things of which Nell had dreamed in her town life with intense longing; which she had sickened to see and hear again; the re-enjoyment of which, she had believed, would prove the panacea for every pain, the cure for every trouble. And now they were all before her in their fullest beauty, and she turned her face from them and hid it on her pillows. The innocent sights and sounds made her tremble, and turn faint with despair. They were no longer for her; she had outgrown them. The simple tastes of her childhood mocked her as she lay there—a deceiver, a pretender, an acting lie in her father's household. Nell had kept back the truth for years, but she had never perverted it before; stooped to falsehoods to hide her shame; deceived her father and her mother, and come back to take her place amongst them, as a pure woman, when she knew herself to be no longer pure. The very things which she had believed would be
her balm had proved her bane. The very daisies and buttercups rose up in judgment against her, until she felt herself unworthy to pluck the flowers of the field. These thoughts so depressed her, that she rose in a melancholy mood that quite precluded her keeping up the farce of gaiety which she had played the night before. She appeared at the breakfast table so pale, and heavy-eyed, and languid, that her father gazed at her with surprise; and her mother, in pity for her looks, tried to divert her husband's attention from them as much as possible, by talking of Hetty and their acquaintances in Usk. The conversation came round in time to their landlord, Sir Archibald Bowmant.

"Are the family at home, mother?" asked Nell. "I could hear the men mowing the lawn distinctly, from my window this morning, and I fancied I could smell the scent from those huge mounds of heliotrope they used to have in front of the dining-room windows. I have never seen heliotrope grow in such profusion anywhere else."

"No, my girl, there's nobody there, nor likely to be till the summer is well over. Sir Archibald is our landlord, and a liberal one, so we've no call to say anything against him, and perhaps it's no business of ours; but he is a very different gentleman since he married again. The first Lady Bowmant was a good woman, and, though I suppose Sir Archibald was always inclined to be wild, she kept him straight, as you may say. But, since his second marriage, well! Usk Hall is not the same place."

"How is it altered?" said Nell, trying to take a languid interest in her mother's conversation.

"O in everything, my dear. In my lady's time (I always call her my lady, you know, Nell, on account of my having been her maid before her marriage), the family used to go to church regularly every Sunday; he and she in their carriage, and as many servants as could be spared, following them up the aisle. But now, their pew's empty from week's end to week's end. Of course, if the master and mistress don't attend church, the servants can't be expected to do so. And I doubt if they'd have the time, for they seem to be kept working more on Sundays than on any other day in the week."
“How is that, mother?”

“They keep such a heap of company, my dear; and when they’re not tearing over the country on horseback they’re playing cards all day. James Powell, the under footman, says it’s something awful—like hell opened, was his words. They begin the first thing after breakfast; and then it’s gambling, and swearing, and brandies and sodas, till night. My lady seems to think nothing of it. She has a lot of brothers, and I suppose she was brought up amongst it all. She drives a tandem, and has nearly killed several people by her fast driving; she did run over Betsy Rigden’s little girl one day; but it wasn’t much hurt, and Sir Archibald sent Betsy a ten-pound note, so nothing more was said about it; but to my mind it isn’t decent that, just as sober people are on their way to church, my lady should come tearing down the road in her tandem, with some young gentleman by her side, and both laughing so loud you might hear them half a mile off. Ah! it’s a very different house to what it used to be.”

“But they’re not at home now, you say?”

“No, my lass, nor won’t be till October or thereabouts, and then they will keep it up till it’s time to go back to London, or off to some of those foreign places Sir Archibald is so fond of, and where I hear they do nothing but gamble. It’s a dreadful habit for them to have got into. I never thought, at one time, that I should have lived to see Sir Archibald the worse for liquor, but I’m sorry to say I have, more than once. However, as I said before, he’s been a good landlord to father there, so we’re the last as should speak against him. He fills my two rooms every autumn and far into the spring, and if I had six I could let them to him. Last year he came to ask me to let him have the whole farm-house and find beds for ourselves elsewhere, and he would have made it worth our while, too; but I told him it couldn’t be. I couldn’t away from my dairy and bakehouse; nothing would go right if I wasn’t on the spot.”

“Do you go to church still, mother, or to chapel?” asked her daughter.

“Why, to church, Nell, of course! What makes you think we should change our religion? You go to church, too, I hope!”
Nell waived the question.

"Only because of Hugh Owen," she said. "You spoke so well of his preaching that I thought you might have gone over to the Dissenters."

"No, no, my lass! No going over for us! Father and I were born and bred church people and we'll be buried as such; eh, father?"

"Why, certainly," replied the farmer; "I never hold with chopping and changing. Live as you've been bred. That's my motto!"

"Of course the Owens have always been Dissenters," continued Mrs. Llewellyn, "so I would never say anything against Hetty going to chapel with her husband, for where he goes it's her duty to follow; but we only went to hear Hugh preach for friendship's sake. But, there! it was beautiful and no mistake. The words seemed to come flowing out of his mouth like milk and honey. They say as Mr. Johnson, the curate, is quite jealous of the way that Hugh draws his congregation away to chapel. You must come with me and hear him one evening, Nell. It's mostly Wednesday evenings that he takes the open-air service in Mr. Tasker's field. He stands on a high bench, and the people crowd round to hear him. He seems to speak so much from his heart. I'm sure if there was one woman crying last Wednesday there was a dozen."

"Including Mrs. Llewellyn," remarked the farmer, as he rose from table and shook the crumbs from his coat.

"Well, I don't deny it, and I'm not ashamed of it," replied his wife. "Nell will cry, too, maybe, when she hears her old sweetheart talk. It's not much of a match for Hetty, Nell—not such a match as I hope to see you make some day, my girl—but they're good people, the Owens, and she's safe under their care."

"And what do you want more?" demanded the farmer; "it's far better than if she'd married some half-and-half fellow, who'd have brought her down to poverty or worse! All I want for my girls is respectable husbands; men as will stick to them and work for them; not fashionable popinjays that would give 'em fine clothes and fine words for awhile, and then maybe desert 'em for another woman! You had better make a lot of Will Owen, wife,
for you won’t get another son-in-law as good as he in a hurry.”

With which, Mr. Llewellyn took his thick crabthorn walking-stick and went on his way.

“Lor,” said his wife, as he disappeared, “the way father do stick up for the Owens is wonderful! Not that I’ve a word to say against them, but I should have looked higher for Hetty myself. William is a good lad, but not more than a laborer on his father’s farm; and John Nelson, at the post-office, proposed twice for her, but she wouldn’t look at him, though he makes three hundred a year in hard cash. But I won’t hear of any farmhand for you, Nell. You’ve got the looks to make a good marriage, my girl, and I hope you’ll make it. You’re rather peaky now, and your eyes are sunken and dark underneath. I shouldn’t wonder if your liver wasn’t out of order, but country fare and air will soon set you right again, and then there won’t be a prettier girl for miles round. It was time you came back to us, for you’d have lost all your good looks if you’d remained in London much longer.”

Nell had listened to this lengthy discourse almost in silence. She had been thinking all the time, “O if they knew; if they only knew!” She had tried to pull herself together several times, and laugh, and chat, as she had done the night before; but she had found it impossible. It was as if some weight had been attached to all her mental powers, and dragged them down. She had a horrible feeling that, if she spoke at all, she should blurt out the truth, and tell them everything. So she remained silent and miserable, wishing that she had never come back to Usk, but been drowned in the deep bosom of the Thames.

“I’m afraid you’ve got a bit of a headache still, my dear,” remarked her voluble mother, as she rose from the breakfast table; “and so I won’t ask you to come round the dairy with me this morning. You’d rather rest on the sofa and read a book, I daresay.”

“No, no,” cried Nell, rousing herself. “I’d rather go where you go, mother. I should go mad—I mean, I should feel my headache much more, sitting here by myself. Let me come and see all over the dear, old house with you. It
will do me good; I must keep stirring, or I shall feel things—my headache, so much worse for thinking of it."

So she made a great effort, and followed her mother on her various vocations, and made the dairy maids open their eyes to hear the refinement of her speech, and to see her graceful movements, and the daintiness with which her clothes were made and worn. Had they but been able to read her mind they would have seen, with amazement, that she shrunk from contact with them, because her dread secret was eating into her very soul, and making her feel unfit to associate with her fellow-men. She had only realized the truth, and what her love for Lord Ilfracombe had made her, by fits and starts, in London; but here, in the heart of God's country, it was borne in upon her to such an extent, that she felt as if every innocent animal, and fresh, modest wild blossom must proclaim it to the world. So she went moodily about the farm-house all day, and her mother believed that she was ill, and ransacked her brain to think of a remedy for her. In the evening, as they were all sitting quietly together (for Mrs. Llewellyn had been asking her husband for some money to get Nell a new outfit, which had recalled to his mind the impoverished condition in which his daughter had returned home), who should walk in amongst them, to the general surprise, but Hugh Owen. He looked rather conscious as he entered the room, but excused his visit on the score of asking how Nell had borne her journey, and to bring her a book which he thought she might like to read.

"You need no excuses for coming to Panty-cuckoo Farm, my lad," exclaimed the farmer. "You're always welcome here. What's the day? Tuesday? Ah! then to-morrow's the grand field night, which accounts for your having the time to come over this evening."

The young man blushed, and looked at Nell.

"Yes," he answered; "to-morrow is my field night, as you call it, farmer. I hope it may prove a harvest field."

"Now, just tell me how you do it, lad," said the old man.

"Do you lie awake of nights, and make up all you're going to say, or do you wait until the people are before you, and then just tell 'em what's in your mind? I'm curious to know, for your flow of words is wonderful, and I can't un-
derstand how any man can talk for two mortal hours, as you did last Wednesday, unless he’s stored it all up beforehand. It beats me altogether. I never heard the like before.”

He had got Hugh astride his hobby, and the young man found his tongue at once.

“O Mr. Llewellyn, if you loved the people as I do, you would find it quite as easy as talking to your family at home. I do think of what I wish to say to them; sometimes the thought walks with me, as you might say, all day long; but I seldom use the words I’ve been dreaming of. I go to the spot with my mind full of some set speech; but when I see the people who wait for me—all of them old neighbors, or children whom I’ve seen grow up amongst us—and most of them dear friends, I feel as if my very soul went out to meet them, yearning to gather them all safe into the fold. The words in which to warn and entreat them come too quick, then, to my lips for utterance, and sometimes I’ve had to swallow down my sobs before I could find a voice with which to speak. The difficulty is not to speak, Mr. Llewellyn. The hard part is to keep silence, when one sees so many whom one loves, living for nothing but to eat and to drink, and as if there were no God in the world.”

The farmer and his wife had been regarding Hugh Owen during this speech with open-eyed amazement—Nell, with a scared look, half fear and half annoyance.

“Eh, lad,” said Mr. Llewellyn, “but it’s a rare gift, and you’ve got it, there’s no doubt of that! But as for living to eat and drink—we must do it or we shouldn’t live at all; and we do it for others as well as ourselves. What would become of my missus there, and Nell, now, for the matter of that, if I didn’t see after the ploughing and reaping, and wife, after the dairy and the bakehouse? We’d all be dead of starvation by the end of the year if I took to preaching in the fields, like you, instead of farming them.”

“Indeed, yes, Mr. Llewellyn! You quite mistake if you think I consider it part of religion to neglect the work we have been given to do. But we can live to God and do our duty at one and the same time. It seems so difficult to me,” continued the young enthusiast, as he flung his hair off his brow and lifted his dark eyes to Nell’s face, “to live in the
country, surrounded by God’s works, and not remember Him! Why, a country side like Usk is a continual church-going! Every leafy tree is a cathedral—the flowery meadows are altar carpets—each wild bird singing, in its thankfulness, a chorister! God’s face is reflected in the least of His works. How can we look at them and forget Him?"

“Aye, aye, my lad!” responded the farmer, as, with a glance at his wife, as much as to say, “He’s as mad as a March hare!” he arose to quit the house for the stables.

Hugh directed his attention more particularly to Nell.

“I hope I haven’t worried you,” he said, sweetly; “I do not often introduce these subjects into my ordinary conversation, but your father drew me on before I was quite aware of it. I have brought you a book to read which cannot fail to interest you: Burton’s ‘Travels in Africa.’ Have you seen it yet?”

She took the volume listlessly and answered, “No.”

“How I should love to travel amongst those wild tribes!” continued Hugh, enthusiastically; “to make friends with them and bring them to a knowledge of the truth! The fauna and the flora, too, of strange climates, how interesting they must be! To have undertaken such a journey—to have left such a record behind one—would almost satisfy the ambition of a lifetime!”

“You should be a missionary,” said Nell; “you are cut out for it.”

“Do you really think so—that I could be worthy of so high a vocation? I have sometimes thought of it, but always shrunk back from so great a responsibility.”

“You seem fond of sacrifices,” said Nell, half mockingly; “you were talking of making them just now. You would have plenty, then. You would have to leave your parents and brother and sister, perhaps forever, and be eaten up by a lion or your interesting cannibals instead.”

“Yes, yes; it would be hard,” he answered, ignoring, or not perceiving the joking spirit in which she treated the idea, “and harder now than it has ever seemed before. But the prospect will be always before me, to my life’s end, as something that may come to pass, if I find no higher duties to keep me at home. But I am tiring you, perhaps. You have not yet recovered from your long journey, Nell—if
I may call you so—your eyes look weary and your hands tremble. Are you sure you are quite well?"

"Yes, yes, perfectly so; only fatigued, as you surmise, and in need of fresh air. All Londoners are obliged, as a rule, to leave town after the hot season, you know, in order to recruit. I shall be all right when I have spent a few weeks in Usk."

"And then I hope you will cease to speak, or think of yourself as a Londoner. I have never been there, but I have heard it is full of temptations to frivolity and careless living, and that it is difficult to keep close to God in London. Tell me something of your life there, Nell. Had you liberty to go to church whenever you chose, and did you hear any fine preachers, such as Dr. Liddon and Dr. Irons? Did you ever go amongst the poor—the poor who live in alleys and back slums, or did your employer disapprove of your visiting such?"

"I know nothing—I mean, I can tell you nothing," cried Nell, suddenly rising to her feet. "I am weary. I must go to my own room. It will take me days to recover the fatigue I have gone through. Good-night! Don’t think me rude, but I cannot talk to you of such things now."

And with a curt nod, Nell went off in search of her mother, leaving him alone and somewhat disconcerted at the abrupt ending of their conversation. Mrs. Llewellyn was almost as puzzled as Hugh Owen at her daughter’s strange behavior. She could not understand her. The next day dragged itself disappointingly away. Nell continued in the same passive, indifferent disposition, and when some neighbors, who had heard of her return home, called at Panty-cuckoo Farm expressly to welcome her, she locked herself into her bedroom, and refused even to answer Mrs. Llewellyn’s entreaties that she would make an effort to come down and see them. Towards evening, however, she became feverishly excitable again, and seemed impatient to find some vent for it.

"What can we do, mother?" she exclaimed, as they rose from the tea-table. "Isn’t this the night for Hugh Owen’s preaching? Let’s go and hear him. It’ll make me scream with laughter to see old Hugh stuck up as a minister."

"Aye! but dearie, you mustn’t laugh when you get there,
or there will be a scandal, and poor Hugh will be main hurt. Besides, you had better rest in the garden. The field's more than a mile off, and I'm afraid you'll feel tired before you get there."

"Not a bit of it," cried the girl. "I'm just in the humor for walking this evening, mother. I couldn't remain in the garden, it's too slow; so, if you don't want to hear Hugh, I'll go by myself."

"O no, you don't do that," replied Mrs. Llewellyn, hastily. "I'm too proud of getting my handsome daughter back again after so many years, to let her go tramping over Usk by herself the first day she is at home. The Owens are sure to be there, and Hetty will be main glad to meet us. So put on your hat, Nell, and we'll be off. I wish you'd something a bit smarter to wear than that big black thing; however, I can't deny but it suits you, all the same."

So chattering, the old woman trotted off by her tall daughter's side, until they had reached Mr. Tasker's field. The open-air service had commenced some time when they arrived there. The thirty or forty people assembled had sung several hymns and listened to Hugh Owen's earnest prayer, and were now engrossed by his address. The young preacher stood upon a bench, his long hair waving in the summer breeze, his eyes fixed upon his small congregation, and his arms stretched out as though to embrace them. He was not so enrapt, though, but that he perceived the approach of Nell and her mother, who took up their stand on the outside of the little group. His pale cheek glowed for a moment, and his heart beat more rapidly; but he soon subdued these feelings, and threw his heart and soul once more into the work he had appointed himself to do. He paused for one instant to recover his equanimity, and then proceeded with his discourse.

"What is the great evil of this world, my friends?" he said. "What is the greatest sin we sin against each other and ourselves? The sin of deceit. We deceive each other in trading; even the smallest grain of cheating, be it the quarter of a quarter of an ounce less in the scales than it should be, is as great a robbery in God's eyes; as great a wrong to our neighbors; as great a wrong to ourselves, as
if it had been a hundred-weight. We deceive each other in religion; we go to church or chapel because others do, and others would think us irreligious if we neglected to do so, but we do not tell our neighbors this. We profess that we attend service for the love of God—because we could not be happy without attending; because the duty is a comfort and a delight to us. Can any duty so fulfilled bring any blessings in its train? And many of us are living lies. This seems a hard judgment, but look into your own hearts and say if it is not true. Which of you shows yourself in your true light to the world? Your small meannesses—your hasty tempers—your neglected duties—your backbitings—you put them all aside in public, and let your neighbors think you good mistresses, kind wives and husbands, liberal parents and faithful friends. But do you imagine you can deceive God—the God of truth, who hates a lie—from whose heaven, we are told, all liars shall be excluded? How many of you now before me could enter that heaven to-day? How many are there who, if their real characters were known—if their secret sins were laid bare—would be received with the love and respect which you all accept as your due? Many a pure and beautiful outside conceals a deceitful soul—many an apparently innocent face is the mask for a guilty conscience. But you cannot deceive your God. He knows every sin you have committed—every wrong thought you have entertained. Is it not strange that what you are not afraid to let your God know you have done, you would not have your neighbor find out for all the world? But which is better, to be rejected of men to-day or of God in the days to come?—to endure a little scorn and contumely now, in a life which can only last at the best for a few years, or to be shut out from God's love forever? Think, my dearest friends, of what His love forever means! Forever and forever and forever—without sorrow or sickness or sin—wrapped in the arms of His boundless mercy and protection for all time, and then compare it with the paltry gain of keeping the good opinion of your neighbor here below—one who probably (if the truth were known) has sinned in like proportion with yourself! If I could only make you realize what God's love is like, you would, in order to gain
it, throw all earthly consideration to the winds and think of Him and Him only! He loves you as no mortal man can ever love you, and He hates a liar. He has said he will have none of them—that, if men will not confess their sins before the world, He will not number them with His elect in heaven. And this confessing includes—"

But here Hugh Owen’s discourse was interrupted by a shrill scream, as Nell Llewellyn fell back in her mother’s arms in a fit of violent hysterics. Of course every one present (who had been longing for the address to be concluded, that they might renew their acquaintance with her) rushed forward simultaneously to offer their advice or assistance. But Nell shrunk from them all alike, as she tried to quell the distressing cries that rose involuntarily from her, in her mother’s bosom.

"Just stand aside a bit and let the poor lass have air," said Mrs. Llewellyn. "She’s so weak and faint after that nasty London, that the walk’s been too much for her. I was afraid it might be; but she was so bent on hearing Hugh Owen preach! There, Nell—there, my lass! try and control yourself, do! Lean on me, and we’ll go slowly home again. I’m main sorry we’ve interrupted your discourse, Hugh, but I hope you’ll go on now all the same. And you must forgive poor Nell, It’s all because she’s so weak and upset-like."

"I’m sorry she came this evening," replied Hugh, who was the picture of distress; "but let me take her, Mrs. Llewellyn; I am stronger than you are, and Nell can lean as hard as she likes on me."

But Nell turned her head away, and, at this juncture, one of the neighbors who lived close by returned with a little chaise drawn by a ragged pony, which he had been to fetch; and, putting Nell and her mother in it, he drove them home, and Mrs. Llewellyn’s whole care was then directed to getting her daughter into bed, where, she trusted, she would sleep and recuperate her exhausted strength. But, creeping up an hour afterwards to see how she was going on, she found her so ill that she sent for the village doctor, who pronounced her to be in a very critical condition; and before another twelve hours were over her head, Nell was raving in the delirium of a nervous fever.
CHAPTER X.

Lord and Lady Ilfracombe had a pleasant time yachting in the Mediterranean. The weather was perfect; the companions, Captain Knyvett and Mr. Castelon, whom they had invited to accompany them, proved to be agreeable and entertaining; and the "Debutante" was as luxurious a little vessel as can well be imagined. Nora, who was the only lady on board, fascinated the whole crew, gentlemen and sailors alike. Without being in the least masculine, she was as energetic and as much to the fore as any man aboard. She did not suffer from mal de mer, and had no feminine fads, fancies or fears. She never failed to appear at the breakfast table, or to sit up playing cards, or singing songs to her banjo, till the most wakeful among them was ready to turn in. She sat on deck in all weathers—even when they encountered a sharp squall and a downpour of rain. Lady Ilfracombe said she preferred the open air to the saloon cabin, and had her wicker chair lashed to the mast, and sat there, enveloped in her husband's rough great coat, and her own spicy little naval cap with a peaked brim, encouraging the efforts of the sailors, and chatting with her friends as if she did not know the name of danger. She was always lively, interested and good tempered, and a general favorite with everybody. And yet the Earl, although he admired and was proud of his wife, did not feel so happy in her possession as he had hoped to do. Nora's disposition had not altered with marriage. What woman's ever did? The prudence or coldness which had induced her to refuse her lover a kiss or an embrace before marriage, extended, in a great measure, to her behavior to her husband. Ilfracombe, like many another man in the same position, had imagined her coolness to be due to maidenly reserve, and thought that it would all disappear with wifehood. The greatest mistake men ever make. Of matrimony it might be written, as the terms on which we are supposed to enter heaven are writ-
ten of in the Bible, "Let the flirt be a flirt still, and the prude be a prude still." Marriage is far more likely to cool the ardent than to warm the cold. And the Countess of Ilfracombe had proved the truth of it. She did not actually repulse her bridegroom, but she only permitted his attentions; she never returned them. The Earl was more in love with her than ever he had been; perhaps for this very reason; but he could not help wishing sometimes, with a sigh of disappointment, that she would put her arms round his neck of her own accord, and press her lips to his, with some little show of passion. Perhaps, at such moments, a memory would come to him of a perfect mouth that had been used to cling to his with unconcealed rapture, and a pair of white arms that would hold him so closely that he would unlock them by force, and tell their owner, jestingly, that she would squeeze him to death if she did not take greater care. He had enjoyed these things until he had wearied of them, according to the manner of men, and now——. He almost thought, sometimes, that Nora was colder and more distant to him than she had been before marriage, but that seemed an impossibility. She preserved the proprieties in public with the greatest care; was always courteous, and even respectful to him, before company; listened quietly whilst he spoke, and deferred to his opinion in everything. But when they were alone she was just as courteous, that was all; and if he pressed his attentions on her, was apt to show the least signs of peevishness, or weariness, or sudden illness, which never exhibited itself on other occasions. But men in the flush of a new love are satisfied with very little, and Nora's indifference only served to keep the flame bright and burning. One day, as she was reclining in her wicker chair, surrounded by her court, she gave vent to the wish that they had brought her favorite sister, Susie, with them, as she was sure she would have enjoyed herself so much.

"I wish we had," acquiesced Ilfracombe, heartily; "and I wish I had brought my old chum, Jack Portland, with me, too. I invited him to come out with me on the 'Debutante,' but that would have entailed his missing the Derby, and I don't believe Jack would enter heaven, if he had the chance, if the Derby had yet to be run."
"Aye! if he had the chance; which I much doubt he ever will have," laughed Captain Knyvett.

"Jack—who?" demanded Nora.

"Jack Portland, my darling," replied her husband; "I must have mentioned him to you, surely. He's one of my greatest friends—we've been a lot together, on the turf and elsewhere. Jack's one of the most reliable prophets I ever came across. He can always give a fellow a straight tip; and he's marvelously correct, isn't he, Castelon?"

"O yes, very good, when he likes," acquiesced that gentleman.

"O come, Castelon, that's not fair!" cried the Earl.

"Old Jack's always ready to oblige a chum, and I never knew him to name a wrong 'un. I know he's won me pots of money, over and over again."

"And lost them for you, too, Ilfracombe," replied Mr. Castelon.

"Are we likely to see much of this immaculate being on our return to England?" inquired the Countess, in a rather tart tone. "He does not appear to me to be a very desirable acquaintance."

"O my darling, you are quite mistaken!" exclaimed Ilfracombe. "Poor old Jack is the best-natured fellow in the world! I am sure you will like him immensely. You mustn't think that he obtrudes his sporting proclivities on the drawing-room. No man knows better how to behave in the company of ladies than Jack Portland—indeed, he has rather a character for liking their society too much! See the mischief you have done, Castelon! You have made my wife's lip curl at the mere idea of our sporting friend."

"Indeed, Mr. Castelon has done nothing of the sort, Ilfracombe; for, as it happens, I already know Mr. Portland, though I had no idea he was one of your friends."

"You know Jack Portland!" cried the Earl, with unaffected surprise. "Where on earth did you meet him? and why have you not spoken of him to me before?"

"To answer your last question first, Ilfracombe, simply because the subject was not sufficiently interesting to recall itself to my mind. And, as for where I met him, it was, of course, in Malta, where, as you know, I have vegetated for the best part of my life."
“In Malta?” echoed the Earl. “Why, of course, Jack has been there! It never occurred to me before, but it was his recommendation of the place that took me there. So I may almost say that I owe the happiness of my meeting you to him. Let me see! How long was it ago? Two years?”

“There or thereabouts,” said Nora, indifferently.

“And did you not like him, Nora? Did you not think him a very charming man?”

The Countess shrugged her shoulders.

“Am I to tell you the truth, or to bow to the fact that Mr. Portland is one of your greatest friends, Ilfracombe?” she replied.

“The truth, of course, darling! I can hardly expect you to see everybody with the same eyes as myself; but I cannot imagine anybody, and especially any woman, disliking old Jack.”

“Then I’m the odd man out,” said his wife, with a moue.

“Really! What did he do to offend you? I’m sure he must have fallen in love with you; but you have experienced that sort of thing too often to make it a cause of offense.”

“Is it necessary for a person to actually affront you in order to create a dislike? I don’t think I saw enough of Mr. Portland to do him that honor. He stayed, if I remember rightly, with Captain and Mrs. Loveless, in the Dockyard, and they brought him to see my mother. He is a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, is he not, with blue eyes and reddish hair? Well, he struck me as horsey, decidedly, and perhaps that was the reason I didn’t cotton to him. But pray don’t imagine, Ilfracombe, that I am going to make myself disagreeable to any friend of yours. It is only that I am indifferent to him. My welcome will be just in proportion to your wishes.”

“My dearest girl, I am sure of that; and when you know him better, you will like him as much as I do. He’s rattling good fun, isn’t he, Castelon?”

“Yes, according to our ideas, perhaps, Ilfracombe, but he might not suit a lady as well. Jack has drank rather more than he ought to have done of late years, and spoilt his
beauty in consequence. Else he used to be one of the handsomest fellows on the turf."

"Is it necessary to talk about Mr. Portland any longer?" demanded the Countess, with a yawn behind her hand. "Captain Knyvett, do fetch the cards from the saloon, and let us have a game! We've been fooling all the afternoon away. It is time we exercised our brains a little."

"What a strange thing it seems," said Ilfracombe, afterwards, to Castelon, as they were smoking together on the poop, "that men and women see with such different eyes! I should have thought Jack Portland would have been an universal favorite with the beau sexe. He's a fine, manly-looking chap, with any amount of brains, and yet Lady Ilfracombe, who really admires our sex more than her own—a regular man's woman, she is, as any man, I think, would admit—can't see anything, apparently, to like in him. It is incredible to me. I shall make a point of bringing them together as soon as we are settled at Thistlemere."

"Lady Ilfracombe is so thoroughly charming in every respect," replied Castelon, with admirable tact, "that I should feel inclined to trust her judgment before my own. It is not at all necessary that a man and his wife should have the same friends, or so I take it. That would entail a great deal of irksome duty on your part paid to women whom perhaps you did not like. Mr. Jack Portland is bound to get his full dues from so perfect a hostess as Lady Ilfracombe, without thrusting his company continually on her. And between ourselves, old fellow, I really think his conversation and ideas are more fit for the stables than the drawing-room."

"No, no, I won't have you say that," cried the loyal Earl. "Jack's a gentleman, and no man can be more. My wife will learn to like him for my sake. Castelon, old chap, why don't you get married? It's the loveliest experience in the world. Don't believe all the humbug people talk on the subject. Only try it, and you'll agree with me."

"Perhaps I might, and perhaps I mightn't, my boy," replied his companion. "I expect matrimony depends a great deal on the woman, and we can't all expect to draw a prize. You've drawn the lucky number, Ilfracombe, and I
might get a blank; so rest satisfied with your coup de main, and don't persuade your friends to come a cropper in hopes of clearing the thorny fence, as you have. But I congratulate you, old fellow. I never saw a man so spooney in all my life, and it must really be a delicious sensation when the object is your own wife, and not that of some other man. By the way, now we are quite alone, may I ask you what has become of Miss Llewellyn?"

The Earl looked round to see what his wife was doing before he replied, in a low tone:

"O that's all right, old boy! I've pensioned her off handsomely, and she has gone back to her friends."

Castelon opened his eyes.

"Really! I shouldn't have thought she was that sort of woman."

"What do you mean by 'that sort of woman'?"

"No offense, old chappie, be sure of that. No one admired her more than I did. I think she is, without exception, the most beautiful creature I ever saw, and as good as she is beautiful. But I fancied she was too much attached to you to accept a pension."

"O as to that," said the Earl, rather shamefacedly, "she must be provided for. I wouldn't hear of anything else. You see, Castelon, you mustn't think me a brute; but it was on the cards that, sooner or later, I should marry. My uncles were always at me about the necessity of an heir and all that sort of thing, and I suppose it is the penalty of inheriting a title that one must think of carrying it on. You know I was fond of the woman—very fond at one time—so was she of me, but it had gone on long enough. Sterndale has managed the business for me. I don't know that I should have had enough nerve to do it myself. But it's all happily ended by this time, and I'm going to give up such frivolities for the future."

"Of course, of course—naturally," said his friend.

But, when Lord Ilfracombe met his wife in the sanctity of their state cabin, he again alluded to the subject of Jack Portland.

"It's the most extraordinary thing in the world to me, Nora," he commenced, "that Jack has not told me that he met you in Malta. For I have had two letters from him since our marriage."
"Most likely he did not remember my name," replied Nora. "I was hardly out of the nursery then, remember."

"What! at eighteen? Nonsense! You are not a woman for a man to see and forget. He has never said that he met your father. And that you should have never spoken his name! It beats me altogether."

"Why, you never mentioned him yourself till to-day," she retorted. "Considering he is such an intimate friend of yours, is that not more wonderful than the other?"

"O I know such lots of men."

"So do I," said Nora.

She was sitting on the side of the bed as she spoke, nursing her knees, and looking her husband straight in the face.

"You talk like a fool," she continued, hotly. "As if a girl could remember every man she has met. And you have not mentioned people much nearer home, to me. Who is Miss Llewellyn?"

The question took Ilfracombe so completely by surprise, that he did not know what to say.

"Miss Llewellyn!" he stammered. "Who has ever said anything to you about Miss Llewellyn?"

"I heard you mention her name this evening to Mr. Castelon."

"Indeed! What sharp ears you must have."

"Perhaps. But that is no answer to my question. Who is she?"

"Well, if you must know, she is, or rather was, my housekeeper. An interesting discovery, isn’t it?"

"Cela depend! And is she to be our housekeeper now?"

"Certainly not. That is to say, she has gone home; her mother was sick and wanted her——"

The Countess got off the bed, and going up to her husband, laid her hand upon his mouth.

"There, there, that will do," she said, quietly; "don’t soil your soul any more on my account, for it is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me who she was or why she went. There are plenty more housekeepers to be procured, I suppose, in England. But don’t forget what I told you in Malta about the pot that called the kettle black, voila tout."
She gave him a little kiss, to sweeten the unpalatable dose, as she concluded, and the ordeal was over; only the Earl would rather she had shown a little jealousy on the subject instead. He did not know how much, or how little, she had overheard of his conversation with Castelon, and he did not like to ask, lest she might blurt out some disagreeable truths in his face. But the circumstance made him think a great deal more of Nell Llewellyn than he would otherwise have done whilst on his wedding tour. He wondered more than once if it were possible that Nell would try to make things unpleasant for him and Nora, or if there were any chance of a rencounter between the two women. Nora might overlook or ignore a liaison of the sort, if it were not brought beneath her immediate notice; but he felt sure she would hold her own—perhaps make a public scandal, if it became a personal affront. He had heard nothing from Mr. Sterndale since a letter in which he had assured him that his instructions, regarding Miss Llewellyn, should be faithfully carried out, and he could not expect to hear more until he met the solicitor in England. He tried, as far as possible, to dismiss the idea from his mind for the rest of the voyage, but he became restless and uneasy as they approached the termination of it; and when, towards the end of October, he found himself safely installed, with his wife, at Thistlemere, the first thing he did was to summon his old friend to render up an account of his stewardship. With the solicitor arrived Mr. Portland. Lord Ilfracombe had not advised the Countess of his advent. He wanted to give them both a surprise. Perhaps, also, to find out for himself how far Nora had told the truth concerning her acquaintance with him. Ilfracombe had always been perfectly frank whilst living with Nell Llewellyn. Under the influence of Nora, he was beginning to keep back things which theretofore he would have never dreamed of concealing. So truly do our intimate companions rule, to a great degree, our characters. We are told that we cannot touch pitch without being defiled. So must we always derive good, or evil, from those we associate with. But if Lord Ilfracombe fancied he was a match for either his wife or Jack Portland, he was very much mistaken. At any rate, neither he, nor any one,
could have discovered a domestic plot against his peace, from the perfectly natural way in which they met each other; for, if anything was apparent, it was an almost unnatural indifference on both sides.

The Countess was in the drawing-room, when her husband entered with both men in his train.

"Nora," he commenced, "I bring an old friend of yours to offer you his congratulations on having obtained such a prize as myself."

Nora glanced at the two gentlemen with affected surprise.

"Mr. Sterndale is an old friend of yours, I know, Ilfracombe," she said, sweetly, "and, therefore, if he will accept me as such, I trust he will consider me his friend also. But"—turning to where Jack Portland stood bowing lowly before her—"this gentleman—surely I have met him before! Why, of course, it is the very Mr. Portland, of whom we spoke once on board the 'Debutante!' How are you, Mr. Portland? Do you remember me, after all this time? Did we not meet at Captain Loveless' once, at a ball? Were you not staying with them?"

"I was, Lady Ilfracombe. Mrs. Loveless is my sister. What a long time ago it seems. How little I imagined, when dear old Ilfracombe here wrote me he was engaged to a Miss Abinger, that it actually was the Miss Abinger with whom I had had the honor of dancing. But there were so many of you."

"Dear me, yes; dozens. I have three sisters married beside myself. Perhaps it was Belle or Marion, after all, whom you were dancing with, instead of me. We are considered very much alike."

"If you will excuse my saying so, I do not think I could have made a mistake. But you must have been very young at the time."

"I was eighteen. I am twenty now," laughed Nora, in a nervous manner. "I never conceal my age, and never mean to. It is such folly. If a woman looks too young for it, all the better. If too old, it will only make a bad matter worse, to take off a few years. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Sterndale?"

"I agree with everything your ladyship says, even if it went against my own judgment," replied the solicitor.
“My goodness, you’re quite a courtier. I thought the law allowed men no time for cultivating the smaller graces. If ever I want to get a separation from Ilfracombe, Mr. Sterndale, I shall come to you to make terms for me.”

“O dear me!” exclaimed the solicitor, laughing, “your ladyship must not depend on me in such a case, really. I have been his lordship’s man of business for years, and I am not sure if such an unmitigated piece of treachery would not rank with high treason.”

“Well, here is dinner, which appeals to us all alike!” cried Lady Ilfracombe, as she placed her hand on the arm of Mr. Jack Portland, “so let us drop all discussion, except that of good things, until it is over”; and the Earl and the solicitor followed her gaily to the dining-room.

But Ilfracombe was longing to have a private interview with Mr. Sterndale; and, as soon as the meal was concluded, he asked the pardon of the others if he detained the solicitor for half an hour.

“You can send us word when coffee is ready, Nora,” he said to his wife, as Mr. Portland held the door open for her ladyship to pass through; and then, with a nod to his host, went after her.

As soon as they were well out of hearing, Ilfracombe leant over the table and said to Sterndale, in a lowered voice:

“I don’t see why we need go to the library. I am not in a mood for accounts or anything of that sort to-night. I only want to ask you about Miss Llewellyn. How did she take the news of my marriage, Sterndale? and is she well out of England? Where did she go to? and was she satisfied with the provision I made for her? To tell you the truth, the thought of her has been bothering me a good deal lately. The Countess is a noble, generous girl, and quite up to snuff; but she is high spirited, and, if there were any chance of her meeting the other or hearing much about her, I wouldn’t answer for the consequences.”

“You need not be in the least afraid of that, Lord Ilfracombe,” replied the solicitor.

“Are you sure? Did she accept a sum down, or did you invest the money for her, and if so, how and where?” Is
she out of England and likely to remain so? I daresay
you will vote me an alarmist, Sterndale; but, you see, when
all's said and done, Nell was very fond of me, and women
turn into perfect devils sometimes when they are crossed in
such matters."

"I repeat, my lord, that you have no cause to fear the
least annoyance from Miss Llewellyn."

"Thank God for that!" said the Earl, with a look of
relief. "And now tell me all you can about it, Sterndale.
Was she much upset at the idea of my giving her up?
Had you any difficulty about it? Or did she accept the
inevitable, and clear out quietly?"

Mr. Sterndale prepared himself for a conference, pre-
vious to commencing which he rose, and, having seen that
the dining-room door was securely fastened, sat down again
opposite to the Earl.

"I have rather a painful duty before me, my lord—pain-
ful, that is to say, in one sense, but, to my mind, providen-
tial in another. Your lordship is now happily married,
and doubtless would wish to cast even the memory of the
past behind you."

"It is my desire to do so—forget it ever existed, if
possible," said the young man, eagerly; "but, still, I
feel that will not be feasible until I am assured that Miss
Llewellyn is well provided for and in a fair way to be
happy."

"Very praiseworthy and generous," murmured the so-
licitor, "but quite unnecessary. In the first place, my
lord, Miss Llewellyn blankly refused to accept any settle-
ment or provision at your hands. She took the draft which
I submitted for approval and tore it across and flung the
pieces in my face. Indeed, I may say the young woman
was exceedingly rude to me, but I can afford to forgive it
now."

"I am sorry to hear that, Sterndale, but I suppose your
news upset her. She was not accustomed to be rude in
manners or speech to any of my friends. But doubtless
she apologized. She took the settlement on reconsidera-
tion?"

"Indeed she did not, Lord Ilfracombe! She has never
taken it!"
"Then how is she living?" asked the Earl, eagerly.
"Where is she at present?"
"I must prepare your lordship for a slight shock," replied the solicitor, gravely, "for it was a shock to me. Miss Llewellyn is no more!"
"No more! Do you mean me to understand that she is dead!" exclaimed Ilfracombe, with a look of horror.
"Exactly so, my lord! The unfortunate young woman is certainly dead. She had an ungovernable temper, and it led her to a rash end. She threw herself into the river!"
The Earl's eyes were almost starting out of his head.
"She committed suicide, and for my sake!" he exclaimed.
"O my God! My God!"
He bent his head down on his hands, and the tears trickled through his clasped fingers.
"Nell dead," he kept on murmuring; "Nell under the water. O it is impossible. I cannot believe it. My poor Nell! This news will wreck all my happiness."
"Lord Ilfracombe," exclaimed Mr. Sterndale, quickly, "I beg of you to compose yourself. What if the servants, or her ladyship, were to enter the room? This unfortunate affair is none of your doing. You have no occasion to blame yourself. You did all, and more than most men would have done, to secure the welfare of the young person in question, and if she chose to fling your kindness back in your face, the blame lies at her own door."
"Are you sure of it?" said Ilfracombe, presently, as he made a great effort to control his feelings. "How did you hear of it? Did you actually see and recognize her dead body?"
"No, I cannot go so far as to say that, my lord; but I have every circumstantial evidence of the fact. Miss Llewellyn disappeared from Grosvenor Square, as Warrender can tell you, on the night of the twentieth of August, and has never been seen or heard of since. On that night, a woman threw herself into the Thames, whose description tallies with hers. Here is the account of the affair published in the next morning's papers"—handing the Earl the paragraph he had cut from the Standard—"and, on instituting every inquiry, I had no reason to doubt that the
young woman, who either threw herself, or fell into the river, was our unfortunate friend. With a view to ascertaining the truth more accurately, I examined her belongings in Grosvenor Square, none of which she had taken with her—another fact which points conclusively, in my mind, to the idea of suicide—and amongst them, in her jewel case, I found this scrap of paper, evidently addressed to your lordship, and which I preserved with the view of delivering over to you, when you should question me as to the matter you left in my charge."

Saying which, the solicitor placed the scrap of paper he had found with Nell's trinkets in the Earl's hands. Ilfracombe read the poor, pathetic, little message over and over again: "Good-by, my only love. I cannot live without you," and then, without comment, having folded the paper and placed it in his pocketbook, he rose trembling from the table, and staggered towards the door.

"Sterndale," he ejaculated in a faint voice, "I cannot speak with you about this now—some other time, perhaps—but for the present I must be alone. Go to the Countess, there's a good fellow, and keep her from following me. Say I have had a sudden summons to the stables; that there is something wrong with one of the horses, and leave me to tell my own story when I return. I won't be long. Only give me a few minutes in which to overcome this fearful shock. You know I was fond of her, Sterndale, and I must feel her death a little. I never dreamt it would come to this—that death would part us—never, never."

And with his pocket-handkerchief to his eyes, the Earl rushed up to his own room.

Meanwhile, Mr. Portland had been saying to the Countess:

"By George! Nora, I do think you are the very cleverest woman I know. I always did think so, you know, and now I'm sure of it. No one, to see you this afternoon, would have imagined we had ever met before."

"Well, naturally, I didn't intend them to think so. I determined on that as soon as Ilfracombe told me you were a friend of his. What is the good of telling everybody everything? It only leads to quarrels. So, as I am quite sure Ilfracombe has not told me everything that he has done
before marriage, I determined he should have a quid pro quo. But, Jack, you must keep the secret now, for both our sakes, and you will let me have back my letters, won't you?"

"Of course I will; that is, if you are so hard-hearted as to take my only comfort from me. But where is the good of it? You don't want to read them over yourself, surely?"

"Goose! as if I would. They are awful rubbish, from what I can remember. Only it has become dangerous now, you know, and I should never feel easy unless I had destroyed them."

"Won't my destroying them do as well?"

"No; because you men are so careless, and something might happen to you during your steeplechases, or hunting, and then they would be found, and the news would be all over the shop. You will give them back to me, Jack, won't you?" in a pleading tone.

"Did I ever refuse you anything, Nora? You shall have the letters, or anything else you set your heart on, only continue to be nice to me, as you were in Malta."

"Then give them to me," she said, in an earnest voice.

"Why, you don't imagine I carry them about with me in my waistcoat pocket, do you? I take much more care of them than that. They are at my London diggings, safely locked away in my dispatch box."

"O when shall you go back and fetch them?" exclaimed the Countess.

"That is not very hospitable of you, Nora," said Mr. Portland, "when I have not yet spent a day at Thistlemere. No, no, you mustn't be quite so impatient as all that. You shall have the precious letters in good time, though why you cannot leave them where they have been for the last two years, beats me altogether."

"You know I asked for them back before you left Malta, and you wouldn't give them me," said Lady Ilfracombe; "and now it is much more important than it was then. I was a fool not to make my father insist on their return, but I was so dreadfully afraid that he would read them."

"Ah! that wouldn't have done, would it?" returned Mr. Portland, carelessly. "You had better leave them with
me, Nora. I'm their best custodian. The perusal of them gives me pleasure, whilst on others it might have a contrary effect, eh?"

"No, no, you have promised to return them to me, and you must keep your word," her ladyship was replying, just as Mr. Sterndale entered the room and said:

"Lord Ilfracombe sends his apologies to you, my lady; but one of the horses requires his attention, and he has strolled out to the stables; but he desired me to tell you that he will not be absent more than a few minutes."
A Bankrupt Heart

VOL. II
CHAPTER I.

For seven weeks Nell Llewellyn fluctuated between life and death, before she was fully roused again to a sense of living, and its cares and responsibilities. It was on a sunny afternoon, in the middle of October, that she first awoke to the consciousness that she was herself. But she was too weak to be more than aware of it. The afternoon sun was glinting through the white blind of her bedroom window, and a little breeze caused it to flap gently against the latticed panes. Nell lay on her bed, as weak and unreasoning and incurious as a little child, and watched the tassel of the blind bobbing up and down, without questioning why she lay there, unable to move or think. An old woman named Betsy Hobbs, who came in sometimes to help in an emergency at the farm-house, was seated by the window, with a large pair of knitting-needles in her hands, a ball of worsted at her feet, and her head sunk on her breast, enjoying a snooze after the labors of the day. Nell stared at her unfamiliar figure with the same sense of incapacity to understand her presence, and the same sense of utter indifference to not understanding it. Her feeble sight roved over everything in the room with the same apathy. The coverlet on her bed was a colored one, and she kept on counting the squares, and wondering in a vague manner why one should be red and the next blue. One red and the next blue—one red and the next blue—she kept on mentally repeating to herself, until her eyes had traveled to the foot of the bed, over the footboard of which was thrown a pink knitted shawl or kerchief, which her mother had bought for her just before she was taken ill, and which she had worn around her shoulders on the evening she had gone to hear Hugh Owen preach in the field. That little link between the past and the present recalled it all. In a moment she comprehended. She was no longer happy, innocent Nell Llewellyn, spending her young life at Panty-cuckoo Farm, but the disgraced and degraded daughter
of the house, who had crept home, a living lie, to hide her shame and sorrow in her mother's bosom. The remembrance brought with it but one desire—one want—which expressed itself in a feeble cry of "Mother!" At least, it was what Nell intended for a cry; but her voice was so faint and weak that Betsy Hobbs only roused from her nap, with a feeling of curiosity if she had heard anything. She was accustomed to nursing the sick, however, and was a light sleeper; so she hobbled up to the bedside and peered into her patient's face. Sure enough, her eyes were open and there was reason in them.

"Praise the Lord, dearie!" she ejaculated, "you're yourself agin at last."

But Nell turned her face to the wall with the same cry of "Mother!"

"To be sure, dearie, and I'll fetch 'er in 'alf a minnit! She's only stepped down to the dairy to see 'ow things are goin' on, for business 'as been sadly neglected of late. Night and day—night and day—the pore dear's bin by your side, longin' to 'ear your own voice agin, and she'll be overj'eyed to find you in your senses. Come, drink a drop o' milk, do, and then I'll fetch 'er!"

But Nell turned fractiously from the proffered cup and reiterated her cry for her mother. She was gaunt and emaciated to a degree. The cruel fever had wasted her rounded limbs and dug deep furrows beneath her eyes, and turned her delicate complexion to yellow and brown. She looked like a woman of forty or fifty, instead of a girl of three and twenty. As the old woman ambled out of the room, Nell raised her thin hands and gazed at the white nails and bony knuckles with amazement. Where had she been—what had happened to her, to alter her like that? Her questions were answered by the entrance of Mrs. Llewellyn.

"O my dear lass—my own poor lamb!" she exclaimed, as she came hurriedly to the bedside and folded her daughter in her arms. "Praise the Lord, that you've taken a turn at last! I've been watching for this for days and days, till I began to fear it might never be! You've been main ill, my girl, and all the house nursing you through it. Father's lying down on his bed. He hasn't had his coat off
for three nights. But you’re better, my lass, you’re better; thank God for that!”

“How long have I been ill?” asked Nell, in a faint voice,

“Better than six weeks—going on for seven,” replied her mother; “and it’s been an anxious time for all of us! I thought poor Hetty would have cried herself sick last week, when Doctor Cowell told us we mustn’t build our hopes too much on keeping you here. I think he will be surprised as any one when he hears the good news. O my lass, it would have been a sore day for more than one of us if we had lost you!”

“I may go yet, mother,” said Nell, looking at her skeleton hands; “there’s not much of me left, I’m thinking.”

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“I may go yet, mother,” said Nell, looking at her skeleton hands; “there’s not much of me left, I’m thinking.”

“Oh, no you won’t, my dear; not this time, thank God! I know what these fevers are. I’ve seen too many of them. When they’ve burnt themselves out, they’re over. And you’re as cool as a cucumber now! You feel terrible weak, I know, but good feeding and care will soon set you up again.”

“What a trouble I must have been to you!” sighed Nell, wearily, “and so unworthy of it, too. Mother, why didn’t you let me die and make an end of it? Life is not worth living at any time, and I’ve seen the best of mine.”

“Nonsense, my girl; you talk like that because you’re so weak, that’s all! You’ll feel quite different in another day or so. Here, just let me give you a few spoonfuls of this beef tea! I made it myself, so I won’t take a refusal! There’s a good maid, and now you must shut your eyes and go to sleep again.”

“Don’t leave me,” murmured Nell, as she lay with her hand clasped in her mother’s; “talk to me, mother! Tell me you are really glad that I am better, and I will try to live for your sake!”

“Glad, child! Why, what are you thinking of? Glad to get my own lass back from the grave, as you may say! I should be a nice mother if I weren’t. Don’t you know by this time that you’ve been my hope and pride ever since you was born? Why, I’ve been, praying night and day to the Lord to spare you, for weeks past! Aye, and not only
me—all Usk has been asking the same thing, and there's been one in particular as has wearied heaven with his prayers for your recovery, if ever man did."

"One in particular?" echoed the sick girl, faintly curious. "Who was that, mother?"

"Why, that young saint on earth, Hugh Owen, to be sure! I never saw a man so unhappy as he's been about you. He looks ten years older since you were taken ill. Do you know, Nell, that he's been here every minute he could spare from his work, kneeling by your bedside whilst you were raving in delirium, praying with all his heart and soul that God would spare your precious life to us a little longer. Hugh Owen has been your tenderest nurse. I've seen him sit here, without saying a word, for hours together, only holding you in his arms when you got a bit violent, and coaxing you by every means in his power to take a drop of wine or a spoonful of jelly. I do believe that you owe your life, in a great measure, to Hugh's care (and so I've told father that, if you lived, it would be); for, though we all tried our best, no one had so much influence over you as him, or been able to make you take nourishment like he could."

"Did he hear me talk?" asked Nell, fearfully.

"Hear you talk, child! Well, pretty nearly all Usk heard you talk, you used to scream so loud sometimes. But it was all nonsense. No one could understand it; so you needn't be afraid you told any of your little secrets. I couldn't make head nor tail of what you said, nor Hugh, either! But his presence seemed to comfort you, so I let the poor lad have his way. He was nearly broken-hearted when he left the farm last night, you were so terribly weak and low. I expect he'll nearly go out of his mind when he hears the news I shall have to tell him this evening. He'll offer up a grand prayer of thanksgiving before he goes to his bed to-night!"

But, at this juncture, seeing that Nell's weary eyes had closed again, Mrs. Llewellyn covered her carefully with the bedclothes, and went to communicate the fact of her improvement to the farmer. As the husband and wife were sitting at their meal, Hugh Owen, as usual, walked in. His face was very pale and his expression careworn. His first
anxious inquiry was, naturally, for Nell. When he heard the
great improvement that had taken place in her, and that
Doctor Cowell had said at his last visit that she was now on
the road to recovery, his pallid cheeks glowed with excite-
ment.

"God Almighty be thanked for all His goodness!" he
said, solemnly, and then added, rapidly: "May I see her,
Mrs. Llewellyn? Just for one moment. I will not speak
to her if you do not think it desirable, but to see her, once
more sensible and in her right mind, would make me so
happy! I shall hardly be able to believe the joyful news is
true otherwise."

The mother looked doubtful.

"Well, I don't quite know how Nell would take it, my
lad. You've been main good to her, I know; but it
wouldn't do to upset her now, and you would be the last
to wish it."

"Upset her; O no; but I have sat by her so often during
her illness."

"Aye! when she wasn't aware of your presence; that
makes all the difference. But," noting the look of disap-
pointment in the young man's face, she added: "I'll just
step up and see how matters are now; and, if Nell's sleep-
ing, you shall have a peep at her, in return for all your
goodness."

The young man thanked her, and in a few minutes she
came back to say that her daughter was fast asleep, and, if
Hugh would follow her, he should see so for himself. He
rose at once, his face radiant with joy, and crept on tip-
toe up the stairs, and into the familiar bedroom. There
lay Nell, prostrate in the sleep of exhaustion; her hands
folded together on the coverlet; her head well back on her
pillow; her mouth slightly parted; her breathing as regular
and calm as that of an infant. At the sight, Hugh's eyes
filled with tears.

"Doesn't she look as if she were praying; thanking God
for His goodness to her?" he whispered to Mrs. Llewellyn.
"O let us pray, too. We can never thank Him enough for
all He has done for us."

And he fell on his knees by the bedside, Mrs. Llewellyn
following his example.
"O Father, God, Protector, Friend," said the young man, with tears running down his worn cheeks, "what can we render to Thee for all Thou art to us; for all Thou dost for us? We have cried to Thee in our distress, and Thou hast heard our cry. We wept in abject fear of loss, and Thou hast dried our tears. Thou has sent Thy messenger angels with healing in their wings, to succor this dear child of Thine, this dear companion of ours, and give her and us, alike, time to do something to prove the sense of gratitude we have for Thy great love to us. O Father, make us more grateful, more thankful, more resolved to live the lives which Thou hast given us, to Thee; more careful of the beautiful earthly love with which Thou hast brightened and made happy these lives. Amen."

No one could mistake the earnestness and fervor, and genuineness of this address, which Hugh delivered as simply as if he had been speaking to his earthly father in his earthly home. Mrs. Llewellyn could not restrain mingling her tears with his. She told the farmer afterwards, that Hugh's way of praying made her feel as if the Almighty were standing just beside them where they knelt. Softly as the young minister had preferred his petition, it seemed to have reached the sleeper's ear, even through her dreams, for as his "Amen" fell on the air, Nell opened her eyes and said very softly, "Thank you, Hugh."

The sound of her voice, and the assurance that his presence had not disturbed her, so moved his sensitive disposition that he sprung forward, and sinking again upon his knees by her side, raised her thin hand to his lips and kissed it several times in succession, whilst his dark eyes glowed with feeling.

"Thank you," again sighed Nell. "Good-night."

"Yes, yes, my lad, it must be good-night, for you mustn't stay here," exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn, who was fearful of the effects of any agitation on her invalid; "you've had your wish and seen Nell, and you've prayed a beautiful prayer, and now you must come back to the parlor with me and have a bit of supper. Go down to the kitchen, Betsy," she continued, to the old nurse, "and get our Nell another drop of beef tea, and I'll be up to see after her as soon as the table's cleared. Bless her heart, if she
isn’t off again. She’ll want all the sleep she can get now, to make up for the sore time she’s passed through. Come, Hugh.”

But the young minister refused all her offers of hospitality. He felt as if food would choke him just then. He wanted to be alone, to think of his great and unexpected joy; to thank the giver of it, over and over again. He walked home through the crisp October evening, wandering far afield in order to commune with his own thoughts, and enlarging the prayer of thankfulness with which his heart was bursting, by another petition, that God, who had given this woman back to him and her friends, would give her to him also, and altogether, as his wife.

He did not see Nell again during the period of convalescence that she spent in her own room. But not one day passed without his presence at the farm, and his thoughts of her being brought to her notice by some little offering from his hands. One day it would be a bunch of glowing chrysanthemums, from the deepest bronze to the palest pink and purest white. The next he brought a basket of fruit: a cluster of hot-house grapes, to get which he had walked for miles, or a bunch of bananas, or anything which was considered a dainty in Usk. Once he sent her a few verses of a hymn, neatly copied out on fair paper; but these Nell put on one side, with a smile which savored of contempt. She was now fairly on the road to recovery, and even Hetty, who had been going backwards and forwards every day, began to find the walk from Dale Farm was rather long, and that her mother-in-law needed a little more of her company. The services of the doctor and old Betsy Hobbs were dispensed with, and Mrs. Llewellyn found there was no longer any necessity for her to leave all the churning and baking to her farm maids, but that she could devote the usual time to them herself. It was an accredited fact that Nell had been snatched from the jaws of death, and that her relatives need have no more fears on her account. Still, Hugh Owen continued to pay her his daily attentions, till she, like women courted by men for whom they have no fancy, began to weary of seeing the flowers and fruit, and books coming in every afternoon, and to cast them some-
what contemptuously aside. It was a grand day at Pantycuckoo Farm when she first came down the stairs, supported by her father and mother, very shaky and weak, but really well again, and saying good-by to bed in the daytime, for good and all. Mrs. Llewellyn was a proud and happy woman when she saw her daughter installed on the solitary sofa which the house could boast of, swathed round in shawls and blankets, and a very ghost of her former self; but yet alive, and only needing time to make her strong again.

"Well, my dear lass," she said, as she helped Nell to her cup of tea, "I never thought, at one time, to see you on that sofa again, nor down-stairs at all, except it was in your coffin. You've got a lot to be thankful for, Nell. It's not many constitutions that could have weathered such an illness."

Nell sipped the tea she held in her hand, and wondered what was the use of coming back to a world that didn't want her, and which she didn't want. But she was still too weak to argue, even if she would have argued such a subject with her mother. As the meal was in course of progress, a gentle tap sounded on the outer door.

"Now, I'll bet that's Hugh Owen, dear lad," exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn, briskly, as she rose to answer it. "He'll be main pleased and surprised to see our Nell down-stairs. He's been so curious to hear when the doctor would let her get up, and I wouldn't tell him, just to keep him a bit in suspense."

She opened the door as she spoke, calling out: "How are ye, Hugh, my lad? Come in, do. We've got company to tea to-night, and you're heartily welcome."

But Hugh shrank back.

"I won't disturb you if you've company, Mrs. Llewellyn," he said. "I only stepped over to hear how your daughter is this evening, and to ask her acceptance of these," and he shyly held out a bouquet of hot-house flowers.

"Eh! Hugh, but they're very beautiful. Where ever did you get them?" said Mrs. Llewellyn.

"I've a friend in the florist, way up by Pontypool," he answered, "and I thought Nell might like them to make her room gay."
“To be sure she will, and give you many thanks in return. Come in, and give them her yourself.”

“O may I?” said Hugh, as he walked gladly over the threshold and saw Nell lying on the couch, and holding out an attenuated hand to him. She looked thinner than when she had been confined to bed. People do, as a rule, when they first come down-stairs. Her cheeks were sunken and white as death itself, and her eyes seemed preternaturally large and staring. But it was Nell, and Hugh Owen’s face grew scarlet at the mere sight of her.

“O Nell!” he exclaimed, as he advanced quickly to grasp her outstretched hand, “this is a joyful surprise to see you down-stairs again! Your mother had not prepared me for it. Are you sure you feel none the worse for the exertion—that it will not do you any harm?"

Nell was about to reply, but Mrs. Llewellyn anticipated her.

“Now, my lad,” she exclaimed, rather tartly, “don’t you make a fool of yourself! You don’t suppose, do you, that I would let my lass injure her health, after all the trouble and anxiety we’ve had on her account, by letting her do anything rash? Don’t you make any mistake about it, Hugh! What Nell’s mother don’t foresee for her, no one else will, let alone a stripling like yourself.”

“O Mrs. Llewellyn!” exclaimed the young man, turning all kinds of colors, “I am sure you must know—you cannot think that I would presume—who knows better than I how you have nursed and watched over her?—only I—I—the natural anxiety, you know—"

“O yes, my lad, I know all about it! You needn’t stammer in that fashion, nor take the trouble to explain, and I’ve no call to find fault with you, either, for you’ve been the kindest friend poor Nell has had in her sickness, and the most thoughtful, not excepting her own sister. But don’t fear but what she’s well looked after, though I hope the day is not far distant, now, when she’ll look after herself!”

“And so do I,” said young Owen. “You’re looking bravely, Nell, considering what you’ve gone through! It’s been a sore time with you. Please God it may be the last!”
"Mother tells me you've been very good to me through it all, Hugh," replied Nell, in a low voice, "and prayed for my recovery scores of times. You meant it kindly, I know, though, perhaps, whilst you were about it, it would have been better to have asked the Lord to let me go."

Mrs. Llewellyn, seeing Nell was in good hands, had wandered away after some of her household arrangements and left them by themselves.

"No, Nell, no! not whilst He has work for you to do here and permits you to remain. Besides, think what a grief it would have been to your father and mother and sister—and to me, if you had died! We could not have easily filled your place, Nell. You mustn't be sorry because you have been spared to make us happy. And why should you want to go so soon? You are young and beautiful—you don't mind an old friend like me telling you that, do you?—and have all your life before you. It is unnatural that you should be loath to live. It can only be your extreme weakness that makes you say so!"

"If you knew me better, Hugh, you would not talk like that. My life is past—not to come, and there seems nothing (that I can see) for me to do. I don't want to look back, and the future is a blank—a dark, horrible uncertainty, in which I can discern no good in living. I shall help mother in the farm-house work, of course, now I have come home, but if will not be any pleasure to me—it is so different from what I have been accustomed to; and, when all's said and done, a dairymaid would do it far better than I. I have grown beyond it, in fact (though you mustn't tell mother I said so, for all the world)—and so—and so—I think you are my friend, Hugh, and I tell you the truth—I would much rather have died!"

The young man looked distressed. He guessed there was more behind this statement than Nell would confess. But he replied to her appeal energetically.

"Your friend, Nell? You may do more than think it. You may regard it as an undoubted fact. I only wish I could, or I dared, make you understand how much I am your friend! And as for there being no work for you to do, except household drudgery, O if you will listen to me, I can tell you of glorious work that lies close to your hand
—work that would bring you both peace and happiness. Will you let me show it you, dear Nell? Will you listen to me whilst I point it out to you?"

"Another time, Hugh, not just now, thank you, for my brain is still too weak to understand half I hear. When I am stronger and able to take an interest in things again, you shall talk to me as much as you like! For I am very grateful to you for all your goodness to me, Hugh, and shall be glad to return it in any way I can."

So Hugh left her with a heart brimming over with content and a great hope springing up in it for the future.
CHAPTER II.

Such of the villagers of Usk who met Hugh Owen during the few days that succeeded this interview, spoke to each other with surprise, of the alteration that had taken place in his demeanor. The sober, grave young minister, who had seldom smiled, and usually appeared too wrapped in his own thoughts to take much part in what went on before him, was now to be seen with a beaming countenance and an animated welcome for all whom he met.

"Why, farmer," quoth one worthy to Mr. Owen, "but what's come to yon lad of yourn, the minister? Is he going to be elected an elder, or is he thinking of getting spliced?"

"Spliced?" roared the farmer, who, notwithstanding his pride in his learning and attainments, cherished rather a mean opinion of his eldest son, as a man; "spliced! The Lord save us, no. Where would Hugh get the courage to ask a lass to have him? He can't so much as look them in the face, and when his mother or Hetty brings one of the neighbor's girls in for a bit of a talk, he sneaks out at the back door with his tail between his legs, for all the world like a kicked cur. Married! Hugh will never be married. He wouldn't know what to do with a wife if he'd get one, not he. He's a minister, is Hugh; just that and nothing more. What makes you ask such a thing, Ben?"

"Why, because I met him near Thomson's patch this afternoon, with his mouth one grin, and talking to himself as if he was preaching. 'Why, minister,' I says, 'are you making up our next sermon?' and he says, 'No, Ben,' he says, 'I'm trying over a thanksgiving service for myself.' And he smiled as if some one had left him a fortin."

"And yesterday," interposed a woman, "when my little Nan ran across the road, and fell down and whimpered a bit, as children will, Hugh he was after her in a minute, and picked her up, and there! he did kiss her as I never see. Nan, she didn't know what to make of it, and stopped
crying from sheer surprise; and when I called out: 'That's right, minister, nothing like getting your hand in for nurs-
ing,' he reddened; lor! just like my turkey cock when the
lads throw stones at him.'

"Well, my woman, ye needn't think he's going to nurse
any of his own for all that. Hugh is too much of a scholar
to bear the noise of children in the house. If Hetty ever
gets any little ones, I expect he'll get another place for
himself. He said the other night that the old farm would
never seem like the same again if there was babies in it."

"He's up a deal at Panty-cuckoo, I hear," said the first
speaker.

"O, aye! that's all in his own line," replied the farmer.
"The poor lass up there has been mortal bad, nearly dead, by
my missus' account, and Hugh's been praying with her and
for her, and such like. And his prayers have been heard, it
seems; for my daughter-in-law says her sister is down-stairs
again, and in a fair way to mend. I expect she brought
the fever from London town with her. We're not used to
have such fads in Usk. A young lass stricken down like
an old woman. 'Twas an ugly sight, and I'm main glad
for the Llewellyns' sake, as she's been spared. 'Twould
have been a sad coming home, else."

"That it would," said his friend Ben; "and I expect it
was thinking over the prayers he has put up for her, as
made the minister so smiling this afternoon. Well, he have
cause to be proud, and he do pray beautiful, to be sure.
My old woman say he bawl them so loud, that if the Lord
can't hear him, it's no manner of use any of us trying for
ourselves. Well, morning to ye, farmer," and off went Ben
on his own business.

Hugh Owen would not have been over-pleased could he
have heard them discussing his private feelings after this
fashion; but luckily for him, he did not hear them. It is
lucky for all of us when we do not hear what our neighbors
say of us behind our backs. We should not have an ac-
quaintance left us in the world if we did. But the young
minister went on his way, little dreaming that any one
guessed the sweet, sacred hope which he was cherishing in
his heart of hearts, and which he only waited for Nell's com-
plete convalescence to confide to her. The time for doing so
arrived (for him) only too soon, and often, afterwards, he wished he had been content to nurse his love for her in secret.

It was, one day, when she was down-stairs again, looking so much older since her illness, that people who had only known her in London would hardly have recognized her, that Hugh asked Nell if she would grant him an hour's conversation. Even then she did not think the request was made for more than friendship; for she had spoken to Hugh Owen of her desire to train herself for better things than farm work, that she might be able, perhaps, to keep a comfortable home for her parents when they were past labor. This appeared to Nell the only ambition that could give her any interest in life again—the idea that she would repay, in some measure, her father's and mother's great love for her. Hugh might have thought of something or heard of something, so she granted him the interview he asked for gladly, and received him with a kind smile and an outstretched hand, which he grasped eagerly and detained long.

"You are quite well again now, Nell," he said, as he looked into her face, which was still so beautiful, though pale and worn.

"Yes, quite well, Hugh, thank you," she replied. "I walked across the park this morning to see Sir Archibald's old housekeeper, Mrs. Hody, and had quite a long chat with her. The family is not coming down for Christmas this year, she tells me, but have put it off till the cub-hunting begins, and then the Hall will be full. She gave me a clutch of golden pheasants' eggs. I am going to set them under one of our hens. Don't you like golden pheasants, Hugh? I think they are such lovely creatures!"

"I like and admire all God's creatures, Nell, and cannot understand any one doing otherwise. I well remember your love for animals as a child, and how you smacked my face once for putting your kitten up on the roof of the stable, where she couldn't get down."

"Did I? That was very rude! But I'm afraid, from what I can remember, that I always treated you rather badly, poor Hugh, and encroached upon your kindness to me! You have always been good to me, and, lately, most of all. Mother believes I owe my life to you!"
“No, no, Nell! you owe it to the dear God, who would not see us all plunged into despair by your loss—I, most of all! But if you really think you owe me, ever so little, you can return it a hundred-fold if you will!”

Nell turned toward him eagerly.

“O Hugh! how? Tell me and I will do it! Don’t think I have so many friends that I can afford to undervalue your friendship. I have very few friends, Hugh—very, very few!” said the girl, with a quivering lip.

“How can you repay me?” repeated the young man, musingly. “Is it possible you do not guess? Nell, do you know—have you ever thought why I lead such a lonely life, why I have not married like Will? My brother is five years younger than myself, and most of the lads in Usk are thinking of getting a wife as soon as they can make their pound or thirty shillings a week. I make four times that as a minister, Nell; and most girls would think me well able to keep them in comfort and respectability. Yet I have never given a thought to one of them—why?”

“Because you’re a minister, I suppose,” replied Nell, “and all your mind is set upon your chapel and sermons and the open-air preaching. Isn’t that it?”—with a shy glance upwards to see how he took the suggestion.

But Hugh only sighed and turned away.

“No, no! why should that be it? Because I’m a minister and want to do all I can for God whilst I live, am I the less a man, with less of a man’s cravings for love and companionship? No, Nell; there is a reason for it, but a very different one from what you imagine. The reason I have never given a thought to marriage yet, is because, when I was a lanky, awkward lad, there was a little maid whom I used to call my sweetheart—who used to let me carry her over the boulders in the river—to go with her blackberrying—to walk beside her as she went to and came from church. Though, as we grew up, I was separated from that little maid, Nell, I never forget her, and I never shall. No other will take her place with me!”

“O don’t say that, Hugh, pray don’t say that!” cried Nell, with visible agitation. “You mustn’t! It is folly—worse than folly, for that little maid will never be yours again—never—never!”
She uttered the last words with so deep a sigh that it sounded almost like a requiem over her departed innocent childhood. But Hugh would not accept it as such.

"But why, dear Nell?" he questioned. "We have met again, and we are both free! What objection can there be to our marriage, if you have none? I would not hurry you. You should name your own time, only let us be engaged. I have told you that I can keep you in comfort; and if parting with your parents is an obstacle, I'll consent to anything you think best. Only don't send me away without hope. You will take all the spirit out of my life and work if you do. I think your people like me—I don't anticipate any trouble with them, but the word that is to make me happy must come from your lips, Nell—from yours alone!"

"It can never come from them!" answered Nell, sadly.

"Don't say that, my little sweetheart of olden days!" O Nell, if you only knew—if I could only make you understand—how I have kept your image in my heart all these years—how your face has come between me and my duties, till I've had to drive it away by sheer force of will! When I found you had come back to Usk, I thought God had sent you expressly for me. Don't say, now, after all my hopes and longings to meet you again—after you have come back from the grave to me, Nell—don't say, for God's sake, that it has been all in vain!"

He bowed his head upon his outstretched arm as he spoke, and Nell knew, though she could not see, that he was weeping.

"What can I say to you, Hugh?" she began, after a pause. "I do love you for all your goodness to me, but not in that way. I cannot be your wife. If you knew me as well as I know myself, you would never ask it, for I am not fit for it, Hugh. I am not worthy!"

The young man raised his head in astonishment.

"Not worthy? What do you mean? You, who are as far above me as the stars in heaven! It is I who have no right to aspire to be your husband—a rough country clod like me—only—only—I would love you with the best, Nell, if I could but make you believe it!"

"I do believe it, Hugh, and I am sorry it should be so, because my love for you is so different from yours. I re-
gard you as a dear friend. I have no other love to give you!"

"You care for some other man," said Hugh, with the quick jealousy of lovers. "You are engaged to be married! O why did you not tell me so before? Why have you let me go on seeing you—talking with you and longing for you, without giving me one hint that you had bound yourself to marry another man? It was cruel of you, Nell—very, very cruel! You might have had more mercy on an unfortunate fellow who has loved you all his life!"

Nell shook her head. "But I'm not bound to marry another man. I shall never marry!" she said, in a low voice.

"Then why are you so hard on me? Tell me the reason, Nell! There must be a reason for your refusal. You owe me so much for the pain you've made me suffer!"

"O how can I tell you? What good would it do you to hear?" she exclaimed, passionately. "Cannot you understand that there may be a hundred things in a girl's life that make her feel indisposed to marry the first man who asks her?"

"Perhaps so," he said, mournfully; "I know so little of girls or their feelings. But I think you might give me a better reason for your refusal than that you are determined not to marry."

"Can I trust you with the story of my life?" she asked. "O yes, I'm sure I can. You are good and faithful, and you would never betray my confidence to father or mother or Hetty, or disgrace me in the eyes of the world."

Hugh Owen grew pale at the idea, but he answered: "Disgrace you! How can you think it for a moment? I would sooner disgrace myself. But how could I do it, Nell? What can you have ever done to make you speak like that?"

"I've done what the worst woman you've ever met has done! Hugh, you have forced the truth from me! Don't blame me if it hurts you. I am not a good girl, like Hetty or Sarah Kingston or Rachel Grove. I'm not fit to speak to any one of them. I have no right to be at Panty-cuckoo Farm. If father knew all, perhaps he'd turn me out again."
I—I—have—fallen, Hugh! And now you know the worst!"

The worst seemed very bad for him to know. As the terrible confession left her, he turned his dark, thoughtful face aside and bit his lips till the blood came; but he did not say a word. Nell had told him the bitter truth almost defiantly; but the utter silence by which it was succeeded did not please her. What right had this man, who had worried her into saying what she had never said to any other creature, to sit there and upbraid her by his silence? She felt as if she wanted to shake him.

"Speak! speak!" she cried, at last, impatiently; "say what you like; call me all the bad names you have ever heard applied in such cases, but say something, for goodness' sake! Have you never heard of such a thing before? Have none of the girls in Usk ever made a false step in their lives? Don't sit there as if the news had turned you to stone, or you will drive me mad!"

Then he raised his white, strained face and confronted her.

"My poor, dear girl," he said, "who am I that I should condemn you? I am far too conscious of my own besetting sins. But how did this awful misfortune happen? Who was the man? Has he deserted you? Won't you tell me, Nell?"

"It happened soon after I went to London," she answered, in a more subdued voice. "I was very young at the time, you know, Hugh, and very ignorant of the world and the world's ways. He—he—was a gentleman, and I loved him and he persuaded me. That is the whole story, but it has broken my heart."

"But where is this 'gentleman' now. Cannot he be induced to make you reparation?" asked Hugh, with set teeth.

"Reparation! What reparation can he make? Do you mean marriage? What gentleman would marry a poor girl like me—a common farmer's daughter? And if it were likely, do you suppose that I would stoop to become the wife of a man who did not want to marry me—who did so on compulsion? You don't know me, Hugh!"

"But, Nell—my dear Nell—do you mean to tell me that
this inhuman brute seduced you and then deserted you? What have you been doing since, Nell? Where have you been living? I thought you came here from service at the Earl Ilfracombe’s?”

“So I did.”

“And you were with him for three years?”

“I was,” replied Nell, who felt as if her secret were being drawn from her, bit by bit.

“Then you had a shelter and a home. O Nell, do you mean to tell me that you did this thing of your own free will, knowing that it could not last nor end lawfully? When you had a refuge and an honorable service, did you still consent to live in concubinage with this gentleman, knowing he only kept you as a toy which he could get rid of whenever the whim suited him?”

“I did!” she cried, defiantly, “if you will have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—there it is! I loved him and I lived with him of my free consent. It was my heaven to live with him. I never regretted it. I only regretted when it came to an end!”

“O Nell!” he said, with a sob in his throat, “I thought higher of you than that!”

His evident misery touched her.

“Hugh, how can I make you understand?” she cried.

“I believed it was forever. I knew we could never be married, because he was so much above me, but I thought—he told me—that we should never part. I considered myself his wife—I did, indeed—and when I was undeceived, it nearly killed me!”

And, breaking down for the first time, Nell burst into tears.

“There, there! don’t cry,” said Hugh, wearily. “Remember, your mother might come in at any moment and ask the reason of your tears. Try and restrain yourself. Your sad secret is safe with me, rely on that. Only let us consider: is there really no remedy for your trouble?”

“How can there be? He is married; that is why I am here. For three years I was the happiest woman under the sun. He is a rich man, and he gave me more than I ever desired, not that I cared for anything in comparison with his love! Ah, if he had only left me that, I would have begged
in the streets by his side and been happy! But it all came to an end. He had gone away for a little while, and I had not the least idea that he was not coming back again. I was only longing and hoping for his return; and then, one day, his lawyer called to tell me that my dar—I mean, that he was going to marry some lady, and I could be nothing ever to him again. Hugh, it drove me mad! I didn't know what I was doing. I rushed out of the house and threw myself into the river!"

"Merciful God!" exclaimed the young man, losing all control over himself.

"I did. Father and mother think I left service in a regular way; but they don't know in London where I'm gone. They never saw me again. I daresay they think I'm drowned. Was it very wicked, Hugh? I did so long to die! Isn't it funny that first I should have thrown myself into the water and been picked out again and then had this bad illness, and still I can't die? Why won't God let me end it all?"

"Because He designs you for better things, my poor Nell," said her companion.

"I don't think so. Better things are not in my way. I believe I shall die a violent death, after all. I remember some time ago—ah, it was at some races he took me to—a gypsy told my fortune, and she told me the same thing, that I should come to a violent end. It little matters to me as long as it gives me forgetfulness and rest."

"You mustn't talk like that," said Hugh, reprovingly; "we must all die in God's time, and it is our duty to wait for it. But do you mean to say that this man has cast you off without a thought, Nell?"

"O no! He offered, or his lawyer did, to settle money on me, but I would not take it. What did I want with money without him?"

"You did right to refuse it. Money, coming from such a source, could have brought no blessing with it. But surely you do not lament the loss of this scoundrel, who, not content with betraying you, has left you, in this heartless manner, for another woman?"

But no true woman ever let another man abuse her lover, however guilty he might be, without resenting it. Least
of all women was Nell Llewellyn likely to stand such a thing.

"How dare you call him by such a name?" she cried, angrily. "Whatever he may have done, it is not your place to resent it. I am nothing to you. He is not a scoundrel! There never was a more honorable, kind-hearted, generous creature born. He would never have deserted me if it had not been for his lawyer, who was always dinning into his ears that, with such a property, it was his duty to marry. And the woman, too, whom he has married—she inveigled him into it—I know she did. O Hugh, if I could only kill her, how happy I should be! If I could be in the same room with her for five minutes with a knife in my hand and stab her with it to the very heart, and see her die—die—with pain and anguish, as she has made my heart die, I think I should be happy!"

"Nell, you shock and terrify me!" exclaimed the young man. "Do you know what you are saying? Do you know that, in harboring such feelings, you are as guilty as if you had committed the crime itself? What has this poor lady done to injure you that you should cherish such animosity against her?"

"What has she done?" echoed Nell, fiercely. "Why, she has taken my lover (the man whom I adored) from me—torn him from my arms! She has destroyed my happiness—my life! Made the world a howling wilderness. Left my heart bare and stripped and empty. And I would make her die a thousand deaths for it if I could. I would tear her false heart from her body and throw it to the dogs to eat!"

Nell's eyes were flashing; her head was thrown back defiantly in the air as she spoke; her teeth were clinched; she looked like a beautiful, blood-thirsty tigress, panting to fasten on her prey. But Hugh Owen saw no beauty in her attitudes or expression. He rose hastily from his chair and moved toward the door. His action arrested her attention.

"Stop!" she cried. "Where are you going? Why do you leave me alone?"

"Because I cannot bear to listen to you whilst you blaspheme like that, Nell—because it is too dreadful to me to
hear you railing against the wisdom of God, who has seen
fit to bring you to a sense of the life you were leading, by
wresting it from your grasp. You have called me your
friend. So I am; but it is not the act of a friend to en-
courage you in such vindictive feelings. I could remain
your friend, though I know you guilty of every weakness
common to human nature; but I dare not take the hand of a
woman who deliberately desires the death of a fellow-crea-
ture. Depend upon it, Nell, that this unfortunate lady, who
has married the man who behaved so basely to you, will
have enough trouble without your wishing her more. Were
it justifiable to harbor the thought of vengeance on any
one, yours might, with more propriety, be directed towards
him who has probably deceived his wife as much as he
deceived you.”

“If that is the spirit in which you receive my confidence,”
said Nell, hotly, “I wish I had never confided in you. Per-
haps the next thing you will consider it right to do will be
to proclaim my antecedents to the people of Usk—make
them the subject of your next sermon, maybe! I am sure
they would form a most edifying discourse on the wicked-
ness of the world (and London world in particular), espe-
cially when the victim is close at hand, to be trotted out, in
evidence of the truth of what you say!”

Hugh raised his dark, melancholy eyes to her reproach-
fully.

“Have I deserved that of you, Nell?” he asked.

“I don’t care whether you have or not. I see very plainly
that I have made a fool of myself. There was no occasion
for me to tell you anything; but I fancied I should have
your sympathy, and blurted it out, and my reward is to be
accused of blasphemy. It is my own fault; but now that
you have wrung my secret from me, for pity’s sake
keep it!”

“O Nell! how can you so distrust me? Your secret is as
sacred with me as if you were in your grave. What a brute
you must think me to imagine otherwise!”

“I don’t know,” she answered, wearily; “I have no faith
in anybody or anything now. Why should you behave
better to me than the rest of the world has done? No,
don’t touch me!” as he approached her, holding out his
hand; "your reproaches have turned all my milk of human kindness into gall. Go away, there's a good man, and leave me to myself. It is useless to suppose you could understand my feelings or my heart. You must have gone through the mill, as I have, before you do."

"At least, Nell, you will let me remain your friend," he said, in a voice of pain.

"No, no! I want no friends—nothing! Leave me with my memories! You cannot understand them, but they are all that remain to me now! Go on serving God, devoting all your time and your energies to Him, and wait till He gives you a blow in the face, like mine, and see what you think of His loving kindness then! It'll come some day, for heaven doesn't appear to spare the white sheep any more than the black ones. We all get it, sooner or later. When you get yours, you may think you were a little hard on me!"

"I think I have got it already," murmured poor Hugh, half to himself. "Good-bye, Nell!"

"O go, do!" she cried, impetuously, "and never come here again. After what you have said to-day, your presence can only be an extra pain to me, and I have enough of that already. Go on with your praying and preaching and don't think of me. I sha'n't come to hear any more of it. It does me no good, and it might do me harm. It might make my hand unsteady," she continued, with a significant glance, "when the time comes and it has that knife in it!"

She laughed, mockingly, in his face as she delivered this parting shot, and Hugh Owen, with a deep sob in his throat, turned on his heel and walked quickly away from Panty-cuckoo Farm.
CHAPTER III.

The Countess of Ilfracombe had had no desire to meet Mr. Portland again; in fact, she would have declined the honor, had she not been afraid of exciting the suspicions of the Earl; and she had not been under the same roof with him for more than a few days before she was heartily sorry that she had not done so. Nora was a flirt; there was no question of that. She could keep a dozen men at her feet at the same time, and let each of them imagine he was the favored individual. But she was not a fool. She had a countess' coronet on her head, and she had no intention of soiling, or risking the treasure she had won. Mr. Jack Portland was, as the reader will have guessed, the same admirer of whom Nora had spoken to Ilfracombe before their marriage, as having hair of the "goldenest golden" hue, and who was the only man for whose loss she had ever shed a tear. The Earl had been a little jealous at the time, but he had forgotten the circumstance long ago. When the Countess heard she was destined to meet her old flame again, and as the intimate friend of her husband, she had felt rather afraid lest her heart should ache a little from the encounter. But the first glance at him had dispelled this idea. Two years is not a long time in reality, but it is far too long to indulge in continual dissipation with impunity. It had wrought havoc with the charms of Mr. Jack Portland. His manly figure had begun to show signs of embonpoint. His complexion was very florid, and there were very dropsical-looking bags under his bloodshot eyes, and sundry rolls of flesh rising above the back of his collar, which are not very attractive in the eyes of ladies. His "goldenest golden" hair had commenced to thin on the top, and his heated breath was too often tainted with the fumes of alcohol. The habits he had indulged in had destroyed the little modesty Mr. Portland had ever possessed, and he was so presuming in his words and looks that Nora had been on the point, more than once, since he had come
down to Thistlemere, of telling him to hold his tongue, or leave the house. But, then, there were those unfortunate letters of hers which he retained, and the importance of the contents of which, perhaps, she exaggerated. The fact is that, in the days when Mr. Portland came to Malta to stay with the Lovelesses, he and Nora had made very fierce love to each other. There was no denying that, and the young lady herself had never pretended to be a model of all the domestic virtues. Her father had been very angry with her, and threatened to send her to England to a boarding school. But the mischief had been done by the time Sir Richard discovered it. People generally lock the door after the steed has been stolen. Not that it had gone quite so far with Miss Nora Abinger as that; but a great deal of folly had passed between her and handsome Jack Portland; a good many secret meetings had taken place, and many letters written. O those letters! those written protestations of eternal fidelity; those allusions to the past; those hopes for the future; how much mischief have they not done in this world. We talk of women's tongues; they might chatter to all eternity, and not bring one-half the trouble in their train, as their too ready pens create. Mr. Portland, not being approved of by the Admiral, had found his visits to the house not so welcome as they might have been, and so the lovers resorted to writing as a vent for their feelings, and perhaps wrote more than they really felt—certainly more than they cared to think about, or look back upon. Nora positively shivered when she thought what might, or might not be, in those letters which Mr. Portland had promised to deliver up to her, as soon as he returned to town. Meanwhile, she was on tenterhooks and afraid, to a degree, of offending the man who held such a sword of Damocles over her head, and presumed, on his power, to treat her exactly as he chose: with coldness or familiarity. But if she attempted to resent his conduct, Mr. Portland could always give her a quiet hint on the sly, that she had better be very polite to him. So her life, on first coming to her husband's home, was not one of roses. She could remember the time when she had believed she loved Jack Portland, but she wondered at herself for having done so, now. Perhaps it was entirely the
alteration which had taken place in himself, but more likely that her taste had refined, and become more exclusive with the passing years. At any rate, his present conduct towards her, in its quiet insolence and presumption, made her loathe and hate him. She wondered, sometimes, that her husband did not perceive the aversion she had for his chosen friend; but Ilfracombe had been very subdued and melancholy since the day of their arrival. As Nora was so new to English society, and could not be presented at Court till the following spring, they had decided to pass their first Christmas very quietly, the Dowager Lady Ilfracombe, and the Earl’s two sisters, Lady Laura and Lady Blanche Devenish, being, with the exception of the obnoxious Jack Portland, the only guests at Thistlemere. The Ladies Devenish were not disposed to make her life any easier than it needed to be to the youthful Countess. In the first place, they were both considerably older than their brother, and resented Nora’s twenty years, and her vivacity and independence as an affront to themselves. She ought to have been humbler, in their opinion, and more alive to the honor that had been accorded her. To hear her talking to the Earl on terms of the most perfect familiarity, and just as if he had been a commoner, like her own people, offended them. And then they considered that Ilfracombe should have married into the aristocracy, and chosen a woman as high born as himself. So they “held their heads high” (as the servants would have said) in consequence, and elevated their eyebrows at Nora’s repartees, when she was conversing with gentlemen, and frowned at her boldness in giving her opinion, especially if it happened to clash with their own. The Dowager Countess did not agree with her daughters. She thought Nora a very clever, smart and fashionable woman, and quite capable of filling the position to which her son had raised her, and supporting her title with dignity.

“Well, I don’t agree with you, mamma,” said Lady Blanche; “I consider she is far too forward in her manners with gentlemen. I’m sure the way in which Mr. Portland leans over her when she is singing is quite disgusting! I wonder Ilfracombe does not take some notice of it. And what could be more undignified than her jump-
ing up last evening to show Lord Babbage what she calls the 'Boston lunch'? Such a name, too! I think some of her expressions are most vulgar. I heard her tell Ilfracombe that some place they went to together was 'confoundedly slow.' Fancy a lady swearing! If those are to be the manners of the new aristocracy, commend me to the old!"

"Well, my dear," said her easy-going mother, "you know that times are altered from what they were. Now that so many of our noblemen are marrying American heiresses for money, you must expect to see a difference. Look at the Duke of Mussleton and Lord Tottenham. One married a music-hall singer and the other somebody a great deal worse. Young men will have their own way in these days. We must be thankful that Ilfracombe has chosen a nice, lady-like, intelligent girl for his wife. For my part, I like Nora, and think she will make him very happy. And" — lowering her voice — "you know, my dear girls, that, considering the dreadful life he led before and the awful creature he introduced into his house, we really should be very thankful he has married at all. Mr. Sterndale was afraid, at one time, that nothing would break that business off. But I feel sure Ilfracombe has forgotten all about it. He seems quite devoted to his wife."

"Do you really think so, mamma?" asked Lady Laura. "I think you are very short-sighted. Blanche and I have often said we were afraid he doesn't care a pin for her. Just see how melancholy and low-spirited he seems! He goes about with a face like a hatchet. I asked Nora yesterday what on earth was the matter with him—if he were ill—and she replied she was sure she didn't know. Such an indifferent answer, it struck me, for a young wife! But, really, one does not know what to make of the girls nowadays. They are quite different from what they were a few years ago. I am sure of one thing, that Nora has no sense of the responsibility of marrying into the aristocracy. I heard her once say that she would just as soon Ilfracombe had been a tradesman!"

"O that must have been meant for impertinence!" exclaimed Lady Blanche. "What did she marry him for, then? I am sure she can't love him. She has told me she was engaged to six men at one time! Really, mamma, her
conversation at times is not fit for Laura and me to listen to!"

"Now you're going a great deal too far," said the old Countess, "and I won't let you speak of Nora in that way. Remember, if you please, that she is the head of the family, and that, some day, you may both be dependent on her for a chaperon!"

This prospect silenced the Ladies Devenish, for a time at least, and the subject of the young Countess of Ilfracombe was dropped by mutual consent. But their remarks on their brother's low spirits attracted Nora's attention to her husband, when she soon perceived that they were right. Ilfracombe was certainly depressed. He seldom joined in the general conversation, and when he did, his voice was low and grave. The Earl was not a brilliant talker, as has been said before, but he had always been able to hold his own when alone with his wife, and used to relate every little incident that had occurred during the day to her, as soon as they found themselves shut in from the eyes of the world. But he had dropped even this. Once or twice she had rallied him on his low spirits, and had made him still graver in consequence. But, when others began to notice his moodiness and make unkind remarks on it, Nora thought it was time, for her own sake, to try and find out the cause. It was after a long evening spent in his company, during which Ilfracombe had let Jack Portland, and two or three other guests, do all the talking, that his wife attacked him on the subject. Seizing hold of his arm as he was about to pass from her bedroom to his dressing-room, she swung him round, and pulled him down upon the sofa by her side.

"Not yet, Ilfracombe," she said, archly; "I want to speak to you first. You haven't said a word to me the whole evening."

"Haven't I, my darling?" he replied, slipping his arm round her slender waist. "It's only because all these confounded women never give one time to put in a syllable. I wish you and I were alone, Nora. I should be so much happier."

"Should you, Ilfracombe?" she asked, a little fearfully. "Why?"
She was so afraid lest he should get jealous of Mr. Portland's intimacy with her, before she had the power to promise him she would never speak to the man again. But Mr. Portland was the last person in Lord Ilfracombe's mind. All he was thinking of was the disastrous fate of Nell Llewellyn, and wishing he had had the courage to tell his wife about it before he married her.

"Because, if we were alone together, day after day, we should get to know each other's hearts and minds better than we do now, and I should feel more courage to speak to you of several little things that annoy me."

"Things about me, you mean," she said, in her confident manner, though not without a qualm.

"Things about you, my angel?" exclaimed her enamored husband, with genuine surprise. "What is there about you that could possibly annoy me? Why, I think you perfection—you know I do—and would not have you altered in any particular for all the world."

"Then why are you so depressed, Ilfracombe?" said Nora. "It is not only I who have noticed it. Everybody, including your mother and sisters, say the same, and it is not very complimentary to me, you know, considering we have only been married five months, is it?"

Lord Ilfracombe grew scarlet. The moment had come, he saw, for an explanation, and how could he make it? He feared the girl beside him would shrink from him with horror if she heard the truth. And yet he was a man of honor, according to a man's idea of honor, and could not find it in his heart to stoop to subterfuge. If he told Nora anything, he must tell her all.

"Dearest," he said, laying his fair head down on her shoulder, "I confess I have felt rather miserable, lately, but it has nothing to do with you. It concerns only myself and my past life. I have heard a very sad story since we came home, Nora. I wonder if I dare tell it to you."

"Why should you not, Ilfracombe? Perhaps I can guess a good part of it before you begin."

"Oh, no, no, you cannot. I would rather not think you should. And yet you are a little woman of the world, although you have been so long cooped-up (as you used to tell me) in Malta. Your father told me, when I proposed
for you, that I must be entirely frank and open with you, for that girls nowadays were not like the girls of romance, but were wide-awake to most things that go on in the world, and resented being kept in the dark where their affections were concerned.

"I think my father was right!" was all that Nora replied.

"And yet—and yet—how *can* I tell you?—what will you think of me? Nora, I have been trying so hard to keep it to myself, lest you should shrink from me, when you hear the truth—and yet, we are husband and wife, and should have no secrets from each other. I should be wretched, I know, if I thought you had ever deceived *me*. I would rather suffer any mortification than know that, and so, perhaps, you, too, would rather I were quite honest with you, although I have put it off so long. Would you, my dearest?" he asked, turning his handsome face up to hers.

Nora stooped and kissed him. It was a genuine kiss. She had not been accustomed to bestow them spontaneously on her husband, but she knew what was coming, and she felt, for the first time, how much better Ilfracombe was than herself.

"Yes, Ilfracombe," she answered, gravely, "trust me! I am, as you say, a woman of the world, and can overlook a great deal."

"That kiss has emboldened me," said the Earl, "and I feel I owe it to you to explain the reason of my melancholy. Nora, I have been no better than other young men——"

"I never supposed you were!" interposed his wife.

"Ah! wait till you hear all! Some years before I met you, I took a fancy to a girl and she—lived in my house. You understand?"

Lady Ilfracombe nodded.

"Most men knew of this, and your father made it a condition of our marriage that the whole thing was put an end to. Of course it was what I only intended to do, but I knew it was my duty to make some provision for the young woman, so I directed Mr. Sterndale to tell her of my intended marriage and settle a certain sum of money on her. I returned to England, so happy in you, my darling, as you well know, and looking forward to spending such a merry
Christmas with you for the first time in our own home, when I was met with the news that—that—"

"That—what, Ilfracombe? Don't be afraid of shocking me! Is she coming to Thistlemere to throw some vitriol in my face?"

"Oh no, my darling; don't speak like that! Poor Nell never would have injured you, or any one, and it is out of her power to do so now. She is dead, Nora—dead by her own hand. When she heard the news, she went and threw herself into the river! Can you wonder if I feel miserable and self-reproachful when I remember that I caused that poor girl's death?—that my great happiness has been built up on her despair? O what did the foolish child see in me to drive her to so rash an act, for my sake? I feel as if her dead face would haunt me to the end of my life!"

And the Earl covered his face with his hands. Nora, also, felt very much shocked. Death seems a terrible thing to the young and careless. It takes sorrow and disappointment and bodily pain to make us welcome it as a release from all evil.

"O Ilfracombe!" she whispered, "I am so sorry for you! Death is an awful thing. But I cannot see it was your fault. You meant to be good and kind. She expected too much, surely. She must have known that some day you would marry and it would come to an end."

"That is just what Sterndale said!" exclaimed the Earl, joyfully, "and you say the same. You do not spurn me from you, my own darling, because of the vileness of my former life? O Nora, you are a woman in a thousand! I have been dreading lest you should find this disgraceful story out or hear it from some kind friend! But now my mind will be at perfect rest. You know the worst, my dearest. There is nothing more for me to tell. We two are one for evermore!" and he kissed her rapturously as he concluded.

Nora shuddered under her husband's caresses, although they had never been so little disagreeable to her as now. How she wished she could echo his words and say that she, too, had nothing more to reveal! But those terrible letters—what did they contain?—what had she said in them, or not said, to rise up at any moment and spoil her life? She
had never been so near honoring Ilfracombe as at that moment—never so near despising herself. But she answered, very quietly:

"My dear boy, you have told me nothing new. Do you remember a letter that you received at the hotel a few days after we were married, Ilfracombe? You left it in the sitting-room and were terribly upset because you could not find it, until the waiter said he had destroyed one which he picked up. He didn't destroy your letter. It was I who picked it up, and I have it still!"

"And you read it?" said the Earl, with such genuine dismay that it completely restored Nora's native assurance.

"Now, what on earth do you suppose that a woman would do with a letter of her husband's that she had the good fortune to pick up," she cried, "especially a letter from a young woman who addressed him in the most familiar terms? Why, of course, I read it, you simpleton, as I shall read any others which you are careless enough to leave on the floor. Seriously, Ilfracombe, I have known your great secret from the beginning, and—well, let us say no more about it. I would rather not venture an opinion on the subject. It's over and done with; and, though I'm awfully grieved the poor woman came to such tragic an end, you cannot expect me, as your wife, to say that I'm sorry she's out of the way. I think it is awfully good of you to have told me of it, Ilfracombe. Your confidence makes me feel small, because I know I haven't told you everything that I've ever done; but, then, you see," added Nora, with one of her most winning expressions of naughtiness, "I've done such lots I can't remember the half of it. It will come to the surface by degrees, I daresay, and if we live to celebrate our golden wedding you may have heard all."

But Ilfracombe would not let her finish her sentence. He threw his arms around her and embraced her passionately, saying:

"You're the best and dearest and sweetest wife a man ever had, and I don't care what you've done and I don't want to hear a word about it—only love me a little in return for my great love for you."
But Lady Ilfracombe knew the sex too well not to be aware that, if he had imagined there was anything to tell, he would not have rested till he had heard it; and as she lay down to sleep that night, all her former love of intrigue and artifice seemed to have deserted her, and she wished from the bottom of her heart that she could imitate the moral courage of her husband, and "leave the future nothing to reveal."
CHAPTER IV.

The Dowager Countess Ilfracombe was an amiable old lady, but she was also very fond and proud of her son, and anxious to preserve his interests. His long friendship with Miss Llewellyn had been a great sorrow to her, and she was rejoiced when she heard that he had made a respectable marriage. But the remarks of her daughters on Nora’s behavior had made her a little more observant, and for the next few days she watched the young Countess narrowly. The consequence of which was, that she determined to have a private talk with the girl, and the first time she found her alone, she proceeded to the attack.

She was a sweet old lady, this Dowager Countess, like her son in many ways, with soft, gray curls each side her face, and mild blue eyes and delicately chiseled features. She drew her chair close to that on which her daughter-in-law sat, carelessly turning over the latest magazines, and laid her withered hand on the girl’s slim, white one.

“Reading, my dear?” she commenced, pleasantly. “Is there anything particularly good in the Christmas numbers this year?”

“Not much,” replied Nora, laying the magazine down. “The stories are all on the same old lines. I wish they would invent something new. I think it is so silly to imagine that Christmas tales must all take place in the snow, or be mixed up with a ghost. Isn’t it?”

“Very silly,” acquiesced the old lady; “but as long as there are fools found to read them, there will be fools left to write them. But where is Ilfracombe this afternoon? Has he left you all alone to the mercy of the Christmas numbers?”

Nora laughed.

“It is my own fault,” she said. “He wanted me to go out driving with him, but I thought it was too cold. So I think he and Mr. Portland have walked over to Critington to play billiards with Lord Babbage.”
"Ah! I thought dear Ilfracombe had not forgotten his little wife," said the Dowager, in a patronizing tone of voice, which Nora immediately resented. "He is too good and amiable for that. I am sure that you find him most kind in everything, don't you, dear?"

The young Countess shrugged her shoulders.

"So, so. Much the same as other young men," she answered; and then, perceiving the look of astonishment on her mother-in-law's face, she added, apologetically: "You see, Lady Ilfracombe, that I'm not a gusher, and I've known so many men, I've learned to pretty well estimate the value of them."

"Perhaps, my dear; though I cannot say I think the knowledge an enviable one for a young lady. But you do not rank your husband with other men, surely. He loves you dearly; any one could see that, and you must have a good deal of influence over him."

"Yes; I fancy I've got the length of his foot," replied Nora.

"My dear son is almost all that a son and a husband should be," continued the fond mother. "He has no vices, but he has some weaknesses; and one is, being too easily influenced by his friends, and all his friends are not such as I should choose for him. I may be wrong, but I distrust that Mr. Portland, with whom Ilfracombe is so intimate; more than that, I dislike him."

"So do I," said Nora, shortly. A look of satisfaction came into her companion's face.

"Do you, really, Nora? I am so glad to hear you say so, for I fancied that he was a great friend of yours."

"What! Mr. Portland? O Lady Ilfracombe, how mistaken you are. If I had my will I would never ask him to Thistlemere again. But you won't tell him so, will you?" she said, looking fearfully round.

"My dear girl, what are you thinking of? As if it were likely. But, Nora, now you have told me so, I must tell you what is in my mind. Mr. Portland has, in my opinion, been Ilfracombe's worst enemy for years. Not willfully so, of course, but he is a man who almost lives upon the turf, and is always betting and gambling. He has no settled income, or a very small one. He is, in fact, an adventurer,
though our dear Ilfracombe would be angry if he heard me say so. I am sure this Mr. Portland borrows large sums of him. My brother, General Brewster, warned me of it long ago. He has also encouraged Ilfracombe in many things which I cannot speak to you about, but which a word from Mr. Portland would have made him see the folly of. But he has been his evil genius. You must be his good genius, and rid Ilfracombe of him.”

The old lady smiled very kindly at Nora as she said this. She was so relieved to find that she did not stick up for the vaurien, Jack Portland, as she had feared she might do.

“I?—Lady Ilfracombe!” exclaimed the young Countess, with somewhat of a scared look; “but what could I do? Mr. Portland is my husband’s friend, not mine. I don’t think Ilfracombe would hear a word against him.”

“I think he would be the first to listen and approve, my dear, were you to complain to him of the offensive familiarity with which Mr. Portland treats you. I don’t think it is either respectful to your rank or yourself. Several people have noticed it. To see that dissipated-looking man hanging over you, as he often does, at the piano or the sofa, with his red face close to yours, sometimes almost whispering in your ear before other people, is most indecent. Ilfracombe should put a stop to it, and the proper person to draw his attention to it is yourself.”

“I hate it! I detest it!” cried Nora, her face flushing with annoyance and the knowledge that she had put it out of her power to resent such conduct as she ought to do. “I think Mr. Portland is vulgar and presuming to a degree; but if it is Ilfracombe’s pleasure to have him here, he would surely not like me the better for making mischief between them.”

“I should not call it ‘making mischief,’” replied the Dowager; “I should say it was what was only due to your position as Ilfracombe’s wife. However, my dear, perhaps you know best. Only, pray, promise me to discourage that odious man as much as possible. I shall have to speak to him some day myself, if you don’t.”

“Indeed, indeed, I will, Lady Ilfracombe! I will come and sit close by you every day after dinner, if you will let
me, and then he will hardly have the presumption, I should think, to thrust himself between us."

"My dear, I should not like to put a limit to Mr. Portland's presumption. He is one of the most offensive men I have ever met. However, if you dislike him as much as I do, there is no harm done; and I should think, judging from your courageous and independent manner, that you were quite capable of keeping him at a distance, if you choose."

"I hope so," laughed Nora, uneasily. "Don't have any fears for me, dear Lady Ilfracombe! My only wish in this particular is, not to annoy my husband by offending his great friend, whom he has commended, over and over again, to my hospitality; but if matters go too far, he shall hear of it, I promise you."

The Dowager kissed her daughter-in-law, and felt perfectly satisfied with the way in which she had received her advice, telling the Ladies Devenish afterwards that they had taken an utterly wrong view of the young Countess' conduct, and she only wished every young married woman were as well able to take care of herself and her husband's honor. The Ladies Devenish shrugged their ancient shoulders as soon as her back was turned, and told each other that "mother's geese were always swans, and, of course, any one whom Ilfracombe had married, could do no wrong, in her eyes." But they ceased making remarks on Nora for the future, all the same.

Meanwhile, the young Countess did all she possibly could, without being positively rude, to discountenance Jack Portland's intimacy with her. She kept as close as she could to her mother and sisters in-law, and took every precaution to prevent herself being left alone with him, but perceived, in a few days, that Mr. Portland had guessed the cause of her avoidance, and was prepared to resent it. If he could not get an opportunity of speaking to her privately during the evening, he would stand on the hearth-rug and gaze at her with his blood-shot eyes, till she was afraid that everybody in the room must guess the secret between them. One afternoon, as they were seated round the luncheon-table, he lolled over her and stared so fixedly into her face, that she felt as if she must rebuke his con-
duct openly. She saw the Dowager put up her eyeglasses to observe them, and the Ladies Devenish nudge each other to look her way. Ilfracombe, of all present, seemed to take no notice of Mr. Portland's behavior. Nora writhed like a bird in the coils of a serpent. She did not know how to act. She could have slapped the insolent, heated face which was almost thrust in her own; she professed not to hear the words addressed to her in a lowered tone, but tried to treat them playfully, and told him to “speak up.” But it was useless. She saw Jack Portland's bloated face grow darker and darker as she parried his attempts at familiarity, until she dreaded lest, in his anger at her repulsion, he should say something aloud that would lower her forever in the eyes of her relations. Who can trust the tongue of a man who is an habitual drinker? At last Nora could stand it no longer, and, rising hastily, she asked the Dowager to excuse her leaving the table, as she did not feel well. Her plea was sufficient to make her husband follow her; but he could not get the truth out of her, even when alone.

“It's nothing,” she told him, when he pressed her to say if she were really ill; “but the room was warm, and I didn’t want any more luncheon, and Mr. Portland bored me.”

“Jack bored you!” exclaimed the Earl, in a voice of astonishment, as if such a thing could never be. “I never heard a woman say that before. Shall I speak to him about it, darling?”

But Nora's look of horror at the proposal was enough to answer the question.

“Speak to him, Ilfracombe? O no, pray, don't. What would he think of me? It would sound so horribly rude, and when he is a guest in the house, too. Never mention it again, please. I wouldn't offend a friend of yours for the world.”

“Thanks. Yes, I'm afraid dear old Jack might feel a little sore if I were to tell him he bored you. But it mustn't be allowed to occur again, Nora. I'll take him out of the house more than I have done. He won’t worry you this afternoon, for we're going to ride over to the castle together, and pay old Nettleton a visit. I want to get a brace of his pointers if he will part with them. We mean
to be home to dinner, but if we’re a little late, don’t wait for us.”

“Very well,” said Nora, brightly. She was glad to think she would be relieved from her tête noir, for the afternoon, at all events.

The Earl stooped and kissed her, and ran down-stairs. Nora would have liked to return that kiss; but as she was about to do it, she suddenly felt shy, and drew back again. Women are so generally accredited with changing their minds, that when they do so, they don’t like to confess the truth. But she waved her hand gaily, as Lord Ilfracombe left the room, and sent him off on his expedition, happy and contented. The afternoon passed quietly away; nothing unusual occurred until the ladies had assembled in the drawing-room, preparatory to dinner being served.

“Ilfracombe particularly requested that we should not wait, if he were late,” said Nora to her mother-in-law; “so I think we had better not do so. I fancy he had some idea that Mr. Nettleton might press them to dine at the castle—any way, that was what he said to me.”

“I would give them ten minutes’ grace, my dear,” replied the Dowager. “The roads are very bad to-day, and they may not reach home as soon they anticipated. It is so uncomfortable to come in just as the soup has been removed. Besides, they must change their clothes before dining.”

“Yes, you are right,” replied Nora, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. “It is a quarter to seven, now. I will ring and tell Warrender to put off dinner till half past. Shall I?”

“Yes, my dear, do,” the old lady was saying, just as Warrender entered the room, unceremoniously, and with an air of decided perturbation.

“What is the matter?” cried Nora, hurriedly; for she saw at once he was the bearer of news. “What has occurred? Why do you look like that?”

“O my lady,” exclaimed the servant; “nothing, I hope; your ladyship mustn’t be alarmed, but I thought it right you should hear that—that—”

“That—what? For God’s sake, speak!” cried Nora, impetuously. “It is folly to keep us in such suspense.”
"Well, my lady, Johnson he has just come up from the stables to say that the Black Prince—his lordship's horse, you know, my lady—ran into the yard a few minutes back without—without his lordship, my lady."

"Thrown!" exclaimed Lady Laura, shrilly.

"Without Lord Ilfracombe?" queried Lady Blanche. "But where, then, is Mr. Portland?"

"O heavens! my poor son! He may be lying dead in the road at this moment!" said the Dowager, wringing her hands.

But Nora said nothing. She was standing in the center of the room, motionless, as though turned to stone. Presently she asked, in a harsh voice:

"Have they sent out to search along the roads?"

"No, my lady; they thought—" commenced Warrender. "Thought—thought!—what is the good of thinking when they should act? Tell Johnson to go out at once and scour the road to the castle, and let the carriage be got ready to follow him. His lordship may be unable to walk. Go at once—don't lose a moment—stay! Where is Johnson? I will give him the directions myself."

She flew down to the lower premises as she spoke, regardless that her dress was quite unsuited to cold corridors and stone passages. She was very white, but perfectly calm and collected as she gave her orders; whilst Lady Laura was shrieking in hysterics in the drawing-room; and Lady Blanche had her hands full in trying to prevent the Dowager fainting under the dreadful suspense. As soon as Nora was satisfied that assistance had been dispatched in case of need, she went slowly up to her own room, with her hand tightly pressed against her heart. She could not realize what might be taking place or might have taken place. She had only one fear—one dread—Ilfracombe and she might be parted before she had had time to tell him that she loved him. She kept both hands and teeth clinched to keep her from crying out and making her cowardice patent to all around, whilst her cold lips went on murmuring, "O God, save him! O God, save him!" without any idea of the meaning of what she said.

She had stood thus, not having the heart or the sense to sit down, for, perhaps, half an hour, when she heard a shout
from the hall—a shout of laughter, and then her husband’s voice, exclaiming:

“So sorry to have given you such a scare! Not my fault, I assure you. We came on as quick as we could. No, I’m not hurt. Was Nora frightened? Where is she? I must go to her! Down in a minute. Tell you all about it then.” And his feet came flying, two steps at a time, up the stairs to her side.

She stood with clasped hands, expecting him, all the blood in her body mantling in her face.

“O Ilfracombe!” was all she could say, as he entered the room.

“My darling! I am so sorry that brute frightened you all so by coming home without me! Jack and I were within a mile of home when the Black Prince shied suddenly at something and threw me clean over his head. We tried our best to catch him, but he bolted to his stables, and I had to walk back.”

“And you are not hurt?” she asked, tremulously—“not at all!”

“Not at all!” he echoed; “only splashed from head to foot with mud, and feeling very much as if I would like to have a warm bath before dinner. But, love, you are shaking all over! Has it really upset you like this?”

Nora drew back a little, ashamed of having displayed so much feeling.

“It was rather alarming,” she answered, with a slight laugh. “We—we—might—never have seen you again!”

“And you would have grieved for me!” said the Earl, pressing her to his heart. “O my dearest, you make me feel so happy!”

A sudden impulse, which she could not restrain, seized Nora. She threw her slender arms round Ilfracombe and laid her cheek against his. It was the first evidence of deep feeling which she had ever given him. But a moment afterwards she seemed ashamed of it.

“There is no doubt you gave us a start, dear old boy,” she said, smiling; “but it is over now, and I’ll run down and send Wilkins up to get your bath ready. You’ll have heaps of time. I had already postponed dinner to half-past seven. Make as much haste as you can, though!”
"One more kiss, darling, before you go!" cried the Earl.
"No such thing! We mustn't waste any more time in fooling or the fish will be in rags. I will go down and see that Lady Ilfracombe has a glass of wine. The poor, old lady has been crying fit to make herself ill!"

And, in another second, she had left him to himself. She found the drawing-room people in solemn conclave; the Ladies Devenish rather inclined to be offended at being disappointed of a sensation; and the Dowager telling Mr. Portland of the terrible scare they had experienced, and how she thought poor, dear Nora would go mad, when the news of the riderless horse's arrival was announced to them.

"I am sure I thought her mind was going, Mr. Portland," she was saying, as Nora entered. "She stood as if she had been turned to marble; and, when she rushed from the room, I thought she was going to fly out into the night air, just as she was, after him."

"Of course it would have been an awful thing for Lady Ilfracombe to have lost her position so soon after attaining it," replied Mr. Portland, politely.
"And her husband," returned the old lady, sympathetically.

It was at this juncture that Nora appeared. She was still pale from the fright she had experienced, and had lost much of her usual jolly, off-hand manner.

"Ilfracombe will be down directly," she said, addressing her mother-in-law. "He is going to have a bath, before dinner; as, though he has broken no bones, he has a considerable number of bruises from the fall."

"Of course, poor, dear boy," acquiesced the Dowager. "O my dear, what a mercy it is no worse. He might have been killed from such a sudden fall. I shall never feel easy when he is on horseback again."

"Never is a long time," replied Nora, smiling; "but won't you, and Blanche and Laura take a glass of wine before dinner? I am sure you must need it, after the shock you have had."

The wine was rung for, and when Warrender appeared with it, and Nora refused to have any, Mr. Portland took the opportunity of observing, sarcastically: "Surely, you must require some yourself, Lady Ilfracombe. I have just
been listening to an account of the terrible emotion you displayed at the supposition of Ilfracombe's danger."

The butler poured out a glass, and handed it to his young mistress without a word. He had seen her excitement, and interpreted it aright; but he did not understand why this gentleman should mention it, as though it were something to be surprised at.

The young Countess took the wine silently, and drank it. Portland again addressed her.

"It must have been an awful moment for you, when Black Prince's arrival was announced. Did you really think Ilfracombe was killed? It would have been a great misfortune for you if it had been so. The title would have gone, I believe, to a distant cousin, and the whole object of his marriage been frustrated. And you would have sunk at once from the Queen regnant to a mere dowager. Aren't you glad he is all right?"

This was said sotto voce, so as to be inaudible to the rest of the party.

"I do not see that it signifies to you, what I feel, or do not feel," said Nora, with her most indifferent air, as she turned from Jack Portland, to address some commonplace to her mother-in-law.

"By Jove! though, but I'll make it signify," he muttered, to himself, as he saw the Ladies Devenish secretly amused at the evident snub he had received. The Earl now joined the assembly. He was in high spirits, and disposed to make light of everything that had occurred. The evening passed pleasantly, though Nora was rather hysterically gay; but, towards the close of it, when the other ladies had retired, and she was about to follow their example, her husband was told that his steward wished to speak to him.

"Don't go, yet, Nora," he called out, on leaving the room. "Wait till I come back. I want to tell you something before Jack and I go to the smoking-room. Keep her amused, Jack, till I return."

It was Jack Portland's opportunity, and he seized it.

"What an actress you are," he commenced, as soon as they were alone. "You would have made your fortune on the stage."
"I don't understand you," she said. "In what have I acted a part to-night?"

"Why, in your well-counterfeited dismay at the idea of danger to Ilfracombe, of course. When the old lady was telling me about it, I thought I should have split. You—turned to stone with apprehension. You—the coldest woman in Christendom, who has no more feeling than a piece of marble. It is ridiculous. You know it was all put on."

"Why shouldn't I feel uneasy if he is in danger? He is my husband. You cannot deny that."

"Your husband, yes. And what did you marry him for? His title and his money. You cannot deny that. Two years ago you were, or fancied yourself, desperately in love with another man—modesty forbids me to mention him by name—but you chucked him over—why? Because he hadn't as much money as you expected to sell yourself for."

"It isn't true," she answered, hotly. "You know that it was my father who separated us, and forbade your coming to the house again. Else—perhaps—there is no knowing, I might have been your wife at the present moment. But as for being, as you express it, 'desperately in love,' you know that is untrue—that it is not in my nature—that I am not one of your gushing, spooney girls, who are ready to jump down the throat of the first man who looks at them, and never was."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Mr. Portland. "Certain little epistles, in my possession, tell a different tale. Most of them are 'spooney' enough in all conscience. At least, if you do not call them so, I should like to see the ones you do."

"You have not returned those letters to me, yet," she answered, quickly. "I trust to your honor to do so, without reading them again."

"Why should I read them again, ma chere, when they no longer interest me? I know you women like to think you can chuck your victims over, and still keep them writhing at your feet; but I am not one of that sort. Once repulsed is enough for me. Your ladyship need never fear that I shall ever trouble you again. But don't say you never
were one of the 'gushing, spooney girls,' or you may tempt me to make you retract your words. Perhaps you have quite forgotten what you wrote in those letters?" he demanded, meaningly.

"Yes, quite," she answered, though with a sickening, faint remembrance of a great deal of folly; "but what does it matter? It is over now, on both sides, and we can remain good friends, all the same. But I wish you would not make your intimacy with me quite so apparent before other people. It has been noticed by more than one person, and it places me in an unpleasant position. And, if it is pointed out to Ilfracombe, it might lead to something disagreeable."

"How?" said her companion.

"How? Why, by making a quarrel between my husband and myself, of course," replied Nora, querulously.

"And would you care about that? He couldn't take your coronet from you for such a trifle, you know. Even those letters of yours—were they to come to light. He might rub rusty over them, but he couldn't do anything. When a man marries a woman, he has to ignore all antenuptial indiscretions. He would make a jolly row, naturally, and you would have a hot time of it. But you are the Countess of Ilfracombe, fast enough, and the Lord Chancellor himself couldn't unmake you so."

"I know that," said Nora. "I don't need you to tell me so. And there is no chance of Ilfracombe seeing the letters, either. If you keep your word to me (as I conclude you will), I shall destroy them as soon as they are in my possession. I wish you would send for your dispatch box, and give them to me at once. I should feel so much more comfortable."

"Why in such a hurry?" said Mr. Portland. "I am going home next week, and then you shall have them by registered post, honor bright. Won't that satisfy you?"

"O yes, of course. And, Mr. Portland," added Nora, rather nervously, "we agreed just now that it was all over, so you won't mind my saying—you think I care only for Ilfracombe's title and fortune, and, I daresay, you are justified in thinking so; but—but—it is not only that. He—he—is so good to me, that I can't help caring—I mean, it
would be very ungrateful of me not to care, just a little—"

But here the young Countess' blushing, stammering confession was interrupted by her husband's return.

"O here is Ilfracombe," she exclaimed, suddenly breaking off, and advancing to meet him, whilst Jack Portland thought to himself:

"So, the wind's in that quarter, now, is it? All the better for me; but I'm afraid her ladyship has sealed the fate of that interesting little packet. If love is to be brought into the bargain, those letters will become too valuable to me, to part with. Why, I shall be able to turn and twist her, through their means, at my will."
CHAPTER V.

The time was altered at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Christmas had come and gone—rather a melancholy Christmas! The weather had been raw and chill, Mrs. Llewellyn had been laid up with sciatica, and the farmer had appeared depressed and out of spirits. Hugh Owen had left off coming to the farm altogether, at which Nell was not surprised, though her mother grumbled, and her father said that, with some people, out of sight seemed out of mind. But, with the advent of spring, things grew better. Is it not always the way with spring? Its bright, hopeful surroundings seem to make one ashamed of murmuring over one's own troubles. The bursting buds, the rivulets, released from the icy grip of winter, the callow birds, the balmy, life-giving air, all speak of renewed action and strength, after the numbing effects of winter. One grows young again with spring. The buoyancy of the atmosphere, and all the glad sights and sounds that salute one's eyes and ears, seem to fill one with new feelings—new ideas—new hopes. Even Nell succumbed to the delights of the new season, and felt sorry to think she had driven her kindest friend from her side. She had tried several times to see Hugh Owen and make up her quarrel with him, but he always managed to avoid meeting her. There was a baby at Dale Farm now, over which Hetty and her mother-in-law were crooning half the day—with which, of course, old Mrs. Llewellyn was delighted, but which Nell never saw without a sigh. She thought that when Hugh christened her little nephew, she would at least secure a word or two with him in private, but it was not so. He never turned his eyes her way during the ceremony, and pleaded other duties as an excuse for not being present at the substantial feast which was spread for them afterwards at Dale Farm.

"I can't think what's come of Hugh lately," said his mother. "He was never what you might call very sociable-
like, but now it's a wonder ever to get a word out of him. He seems to spend his life praying people out of the world, and I'm sure it don't make him more cheerful at home."

"There, missus, let the lad alone, do!" exclaimed her husband. "You know'd from the first that he was good for nothing but the ministry. He's got no heart, nor stomach, nor liver, nor nothing, hasn't Hugh; he's just a minister and nothing else. He's been as silent and as sulky as a bear for the last three months, but I take no notice of it. Let him go on his own way, say I; and, thank the Lord, 'tain't mine!"

"Well, I suppose we've offended him, though I'm sure I can't tell how," interposed Mrs. Llewellyn, "for he's not been near us for ever so long. When our Nell was ill he was at the farm every day, praying most beautiful, and bringing her books and flowers and such like; but I don't believe we've seen him, not to speak of, since Christmas, have we, Nell?"

"I don't think we have, mother," replied Nell, consciously.

"O that's plain enough," said Farmer Owen; "you ain't dying any longer, my lass, or you'd have Master Hugh at your bedside often enough. He don't care for lasses with rosy cheeks and who can eat a good dinner and use their legs! They've no interest for a minister! You shouldn't have got well if you wanted to keep Hugh by your side."

"Well, for my part, I wish she was better than she is, if we never saw Hugh again for it, begging your pardons, neighbors. But Nell ain't half satisfactory. Doctor Cowell he says it's only the weakness after the fever; but she's a long time coming round, to my mind. She eats pretty well, but she hasn't got any life in her, nor she can't seem to take any interest in anything. Her memory, too, is something dreadful. She's always dreaming when she ought to be doing. We must see if we can't send her to Cardiff or Swansea this summer, for the benefit of the sea-air."

Nell colored faintly as she replied:

"Now, mother, I wish you'd talk of something more interesting than me. I'm right enough. And we're all talking of ourselves and forgetting the little man's health. Who'll propose the toast? Shall I? Here's to the very
good health of Griffith William Owen, and may he live a long life and a happy one!"

And, in the chatter and congratulations that followed the toast, Nell and Hugh were both happily forgotten. All the same, she wished he had not taken her communication so much to heart, and was dreadfully afraid lest his evident avoidance of Panty-cuckoo Farm should end by directing some sort of suspicion towards herself. It was about this time that Nell perceived that there was something decidedly wrong with her father; not in health, but in mind. He seemed to regard everything in its worst light, and to have some objection to make to whatever might be said to him. If her mother remarked how comfortable and happy Hetty was in her new home, Mr. Llewellyn would observe:

"Aye, aye! it's just as well she's feathered her nest before troubles come;" or, if Nell said she felt stronger and better for the fine weather, it would be: "Well, I don't know as it's a thing to crow over. Many a person's happier dead than alive."

At last, one morning, she came down to breakfast, to find him in a brown study over a lawyer's letter which had reached him in a long, blue envelope. The postman was a rare visitor at Panty-cuckoo Farm. The Llewellyns had not many relatives, and were not a writing family if they had had them. Everything went on too simply with them to require much correspondence. Above all, a lawyer's letter was a rarity.

"Had bad news, father?" inquired Nell, as she met him.

"Aye, my lass! as bad as it could well be! Sir Archibald Bowmant's going to raise the rent of the old farm again, and I don't know how it's to be made to pay it. Times have been awful hard the last year or two, Nell. Of course, the mother didn't say nothing to you up in London town about it. Where was the use? You was well provided for in a rare good and respectable situation; we knew you was safe, and didn't want to worry you with our troubles. But since Sir Archibald's married this new lady, he's been an altered man. He used to think a deal of his tenants in the old times, and I don't say he's a bad landlord now; but she runs him into a lot of money, I hear, and then the land has to pay for it. Here's a notice
from the solicitor, to say the rents will all be raised again after next summer. It's deuced hard on a man like me. I've spent more than I know where to put my hand on, this autumn, draining and manuring, and now I shall have to pay all I hoped to make by it on the rent. But it can't go on forever. The worm will turn some day, and I shall chuck up the farm and emigrate."

"O father, don't talk like that," cried his wife. "What would you and I do, emigrating at our age? 'Tisn't as if we were young and strong. We should die before we had crossed the sea. We'll get on, right enough, now I've got Nell to help me with the dairy, and that must keep us going till you're straight again."

"You're a good wife, Mary," said the farmer; "but you're a fool, for all that. Will the dairy keep the men and horses, and pay for the sub-soil dressings, and the fish manure, and the losses which every year brings with it? You women don't understand the number of expenses, keeping up a large farm like this, entails. I've only just done it for years past, and if the rents are to be raised, why, I can't do it, and that's all."

"But you won't decide in a hurry, father," said Nell.

"No, lass, no. But it's very discouraging. It takes the heart out of a man for work, or anything. Sometimes I wish I had emigrated when I was young. There, out in Canada, the Government gives a man one hundred and fifty acres of land free, and if he's got a little money of his own, and a little gumption, he can make a living for his family, and have something to leave behind him, when he goes."

"Well, well," said his daughter, soothingly, "if the worst comes to the worst, father, I will go out to Canada with mother and you, and we'll see if we can't manage to keep ourselves alive, somehow."

She put her hand on the old man's gray head as she spoke, and he got hold of it, and drew it down with his own.

"What a soft, white thing it is," he said, admiringly. "You're a good, kind lass, Nell, but I doubt if you could do much work with such fingers as these. Where did ye get them from? Who'd think you'd done hard work in your lifetime? They look like a lady's; so smooth and
soft. You must have had a fine, easy place of it, up at Lord Ilfracombe’s, Nell. It was a pity you ever left it. You won’t get such another in a hurry.”

“No, father, I know that,” she answered, sadly.

“And you think you were foolish to chuck it, my girl. You fret a bit over it sometimes, eh, Nell?”

“Sometimes, father,” she said, in a low voice.

“Ah, my lass; you see, we never know what’s best for us. I was main glad to see ye home, so was mother; but if times get worse than they are, I shall be sorry ye ever came.”

“Then I’ll go to service again,” she answered quickly. “Don’t be afraid I’ll ever be a burden on you, dear father! I am capable of filling many situations—a nurse’s, for instance. If, as you say, times get worse, I’ll practice on little Griffith, and advertise for a place in the nursery.”

She spoke in jest; but Mr. Llewellyn took her words in earnest.

“Aye, my lass, and you’d get it, too! The Earl would give you a grand character, I’m bound to say. Wouldn’t he, now? Three years is a good time to stay in one place.”

“Yes, yes! of course,” said Nell, hastily, as she remembered the circumstances under which she had left Grosvenor Square, and hurried away, for fear her father should take it in his head to question her about it.

Poor Nell! Her absent lord was never absent from her heart or thoughts, but she dared not indulge herself in too much reminiscence lest she should break down under it. Whilst Lord Ilfracombe was growing happier, day by day, in the increasing affection of his wife, the unfortunate woman, whom he believed to be buried beneath the bosom of the river, was wearying her heart out for news of him, and wondering, often, how she could possibly contrive to get sight or speech of him without attracting the attention of her friends. By day, she had little leisure to indulge in dreaming; but as soon as night fell, and she found herself in solitude and silence on her bed, the ghost of her happy, reckless past would walk out of its sanctuary to confront her, and she would lie awake half the night, pondering on Ilfracombe’s appearance and recalling his ten-
derest moments and sayings and doings, till she had worked herself up into a state of despair. She had persuaded herself that her separation from her lover was no fault of his, but the combined work of Mr. Sterndale and the woman he had married, and that, if Ilfracombe saw her again, all his first admiration and affection would be rekindled. Nell did not stop to consider how bitterly unfair this would be to his young wife. She hated the very thought of Nora, and would have injured her in any possible way. Lord Ilfracombe was hers—hers alone—that was the way she argued, and his wife had robbed her of him and must take the consequences, whatever they might be. Her love for him was so deep—so passionate—so overwhelming—he could not resist nor stand against it. Had she only refused to let him leave England, his marriage would never have taken place. It had been a cheat, a robbery, a fraud, and such things never thrive. If they only met—if she could only meet him—he and his wife would both have to acknowledge the truth of what she said. Meanwhile, however, she could gain no news of the Earl of Ilfracombe, her own act of supposed suicide having put the possibility of hearing of him out of her reach. She could not come in contact with him again without her former position in his household being made known. For this reason, as long as she remained with her parents, Nell saw no chance of seeing him. And it was only at times that she desired it. At others, she felt as if the sight of her perfidious lover would kill her—as if she would run miles the other way sooner than encounter him—and these were the despairing moments, when she wept till she was nearly blind, and made her mother rather impatient because she would not confess what ailed her nor say what she wanted. The poor girl was passing through the gates of hell, through which most of us have had to pass during our lifetime, in which whoever enters must leave hope behind, for the portals are so dark and gloomy that hope could not exist there. Some women will get over a disappointment like this in a reasonable time; some never get over it at all; and Nell Llewellyn was one of the latter. Her very soul had entered into her love for Lord Ilfracombe, and she could not disentangle it. It had not been an ordinary love
with which she had regarded him, but an ardent worship, such worship as a devotee renders to the god of his religion. I do not say that such women never love again, but they never forget the first love, which is ready to revive at the first opportunity—and which lives with them, all through the exercise of the second, glorifying it, as it were, by the halo thrown over it from the past. Nell was still in a state of hopeless collapse. She had not got over the news of Ilfracombe’s marriage in the slightest degree—she was perfectly aware that he had shut the gates of paradise between them for evermore—yet she had often experienced this feverish anxiety to learn from his own lips in what light he regarded their separation. Meanwhile, her conscience occasionally accused her of not having behaved as kindly as she might to Hugh Owen—sometimes gave her a sickening qualm also, as she remembered she had parted with her cherished secret to a man who had, apparently, quarreled with her ever since. He had assured her it was safe with him; but Nell felt that he despised her for the confession she had made; and might not his contempt lead him to forget his promise? She wanted further assurance that he would be faithful and true. She went over to the Dale Farm far oftener than she had been wont to do (which Hetty accepted entirely as a compliment to her baby), in the hope of encountering him, but he always managed to slink away before she reached the house, or to have some excuse for leaving directly afterwards. One afternoon, toward the end of May, however, as she distinctly saw him hurrying off through the fields at the back, with a book in his hand, Nell waited till he was well out of sight, and then, altering her course, turned also and followed him up.
CHAPTER VI.

The country was in its full spring-tide beauty. The hedges were gay with shepherds' purse and pimpernel, and merry with the song of birds, rejoicing over their young. The green meadows were dotted over with the late lambs, skipping like the high hills of scripture, and as Nell followed on Hugh Owen's track, she trod the sweet woodruff under her feet. A balmy, southwest wind blew on her heated face, as she ran over the grassy hill, up which he was slowly wending his way, with his eyes bent on his book. She had captured him at last. A long stretch of grassland lay between them yet, but there was no friendly copse, or orchard on the way, in which he could take shelter from her. Not that Hugh even knew of her approach. He had seen her coming up the graveled walk that led to the Dale Farm, and slipped out, as usual, by the back door, in order to avoid her. After her last words to him, he thought his presence must be as objectionable to Nell, as hers was distressing to him. That she should take the trouble to follow him, never entered his head; so he went on slowly, poring over his book, and was more startled than she could imagine, when he heard a voice calling gaspingly after him:

"Hugh! Hugh!"

He turned round then, to meet Nell's beautiful face, flushed with exertion, as she panted to come up with him.

"Stop, Hugh. Stop a minute. I want to speak to you," she said, breathlessly.

He halted at her appeal; but he did not smile as she reached his side.

"O Hugh, I have wanted to speak to you for so long," said Nell, as they stood opposite each other. "What is the matter with you? Why do you never come to Panty-cuckoo now?"

He looked at her with grave surprise.

"Why do I never go to Panty-cuckoo now?" he repeated after her. "I should have thought you were the last per-
son to ask me that question, Nell. Have you forgotten the words with which you sent me from you?"

"Yes. What did I say? Anything very dreadful? How little you must know of women to fancy they mean everything they say. You made me angry, I suppose, and I resented it. But that is four months ago. It's ridiculous to keep up a grudge all that time."

"I don't think you were angry," replied Hugh, in his low, sweet voice. "I think you were in earnest, Nell, when you told me to leave Panty-cuckoo Farm, and never come back again; and that, after what had passed between us, my presence would be an extra pain to you. Was it likely, after that, that I could intrude my company on you? You must know that I didn't keep away from choice."

"No, I didn't. I thought, perhaps, you considered me altogether too bad to associate with—that I should contaminate you, and make you unfit for the ministry; and so it was your duty not to come near me any more. That is what I thought."

"How very little you know me," said the young man, with a sigh.

"But mother and father are always asking after you," continued Nell, hurriedly, "and wondering why you never come near us, and it makes it rather awkward for me, you know, Hugh. I have told them all kinds of stories to excuse your absence; but it would be much better if you could come and see the old people now and then. I would keep out of the way, if you prefer it, whilst you are there."

He did not contradict her, only saying:

"I should be sorry to vex Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn, who have always been very good to me. I hope they thought it was my duties that kept me away. I should not like them to know that you and I have quarreled."

"But have we quarreled?" said Nell, wistfully. "Cannot we be friends, still, Hugh, as we were before—before—your last visit, you know. We are rather sad up at Panty-cuckoo just now. Father seems quite down-hearted about his farm. Sir Archibald has decided to raise the rent again, and father says he won't be able to make the place pay if he does. Sometimes he talks of emigrating—fancy, his doing that at his age; and oftener, the poor old man
says he has lived too long, and it will be a good day when he is carried to Usk church-yard. And what with that, and—and—other things, I think, sometimes, Hugh, that life is altogether too hard to bear, and it is a pity mine wasn’t ended when I tried to end it.”

“Poor Nell,” said Hugh. “No, don’t say that. If your life had not held better things in store for you, surely the Lord would not have given it back to you, twice running. But I must come over and talk to your father, and see if I cannot cheer him up. If the worst comes to the worst, Nell, I don’t see why he should not try his fortune in another country. He is not so very old, sixty, or thereabouts, I think, and he will take his experience with him, and sell it, maybe, to other men. There are countries, as, I daresay you have heard, like Canada, for instance, where Government gives the land away to men who can cultivate it, and your father must have a good sum of money sunk in his stock and implements. With a little money in hand, a man with knowledge may do wonders in Canada or New Zealand, and live out there as long again as he would have done in England.”

“O Hugh, you are talking nonsense. How would father and mother feel, uprooted from the old place where they have spent almost all their lives, and set down in a strange country, without a friend or acquaintance near them? They would die. They couldn’t stand it. It would be too great a wrench.”

“Would not you go with them?” asked Hugh, dubiously.

“I? O yes, of course, I should. But what good should I be to them? Only an extra burden. If father had a son, it would be different. But he would require some strong young head and hand, to lift the greater part of the burden off his shoulders.”

“I agree with you. But don’t stand talking here. You don’t look fit for that yet, Nell. Surely you should be looking more like your old self, after all these months. Sit down on this turf; it is quite dry, and let us talk over what you have told me, together.”

He held out his hand to her as he spoke, and Nell availed herself of his assistance, to take a seat on the bank by the side of the field.
“O Nell,” he exclaimed, as he released it, “how hot your hand is, and how thin. Do you feel weak?”

“Not over strong,” replied Nell, laughing as they sat down, side by side. It was true that she had hardly gained any strength worth speaking of, since her illness. The wild longings she indulged in—the regrets for her lost position—and the remorse with which she was occasionally attacked, were all working a great and abiding change in her constitution. The old people saw her going about as usual, and never heard her complain; so they thought she was all right, and attributed any little languor or daintiness on her part to her London schooling. But Hugh, with a lover’s eye, perceived the change in her vividly, and noted, with grief, the hollowness of her eyes, and the attenuation of her hand.

“My poor girl,” he said, tenderly, as he gazed at her thin face; “what have you been doing to yourself? You’ve been fretting, sorely, I’m afraid, Nell, since I saw you last.”

This direct appeal broke Nell down. No one had given her such sympathy as this before.

“O yes, Hugh; yes, I have,” she cried. “I try so hard to forget, but it seems impossible. I longed so much to come back to Panty-cuckoo. I thought the beautiful, quiet, peaceful country would heal my sore wound, and help me to forget. But it seems worse than the town. There, the rattle and the noise might have shut out other sounds. But here, in the peaceful silence, I hear voices, and see faces that I want to shut out from my mind, forever. O it is very hard, that when one tries, and wishes to be good, and do no wrong, God should let the devil have such dominion over us. Why is it, Hugh? Why doesn’t He hear our prayers, and let us forget? Sometimes I feel as if I should go mad in Panty-cuckoo, when I remember the time when I was a little girl, and went blackberrying or nutting with you and the other children, and remember those happy, innocent days can never, never come over again. O Hugh, I feel as if I had been in possession of untold wealth, and I had deliberately thrown it away. Will it always be so? Shall I never be any better? Am I to go on suffering like this to my life’s end?”
"I hope not, Nell," replied the young man. "You are not strong enough for dairy and farm work, and it leaves your brain too little to do, so it broods incessantly upon the past. The work you want, Nell, is head work—something by which you will feel you are benefiting others. That is the employment to bring peace and forgetfulness in its train. You should be a missionary, as I am."

"A missionary. I? Ah, now, Hugh, you are laughing at me! A preacher should have no sins to look back upon."

"Then there would be no preachers in the world, Nell. I say, on the contrary, that no one can teach others, till he himself has been taught of God. He cannot relieve suffering, unless he, too, has suffered. He cannot know the enormity of sin, nor the trouble it brings in its train, till he himself has sinned, as we all have; and if any man says he has not, he lies, before the God who made him."

"But not like what I have," said poor Nell, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Don't you think, Nell," said Hugh, "when you remember all the suffering and shame and remorse that your sin has brought you, that you could speak very forcibly to any girl whom you saw in danger of running the same risk? Would not you, out of the kindness of your woman's heart, warn her not to do as you have done, and point out to her the pain that must succeed it?"

"Oh yes, of course, I could and would, Hugh! It would be very cruel not to do so."

"Then, you see, you are fit for a missionary. You said just now that if your father had a son to accompany him to a new country, emigration would be a different thing for him. Well, if he elects to go, I am willing to accompany him, and to be, as far as in me lies, as a son to him—aiding him all I can with my strong, young arm and head—on one condition."

"What is the condition, Hugh?" asked Nell.

"That you will come, too, as my wife and helper! If you consent, I will show you a way to heal your sore hurt, that shall bring you the utmost peace at last. I don't promise you happiness, though I would try hard to secure you that also; but peace I know you will have, for God will send it.
Come with me and be my helper and companion. We will go to some country so widely different from England, that nothing in it shall ever have the power to remind you of the terrible experience you have passed through here; and in a warmer climate you will, I hope, regain the health and strength which you have lost. Do you remember how you told me, long ago, that I was cut out for a missionary? and you were right. The very thought warms my blood. We will go to South Africa, or anywhere that is considered best for us all, and I will devote my life to securing the happiness of yours. Will you come?"

Nell turned round and looked at him with astonishment.

"Will I go to South Africa with you as your wife? Hugh, do you know what you are asking me?"

"Exactly. I am asking you the same thing I asked you four months ago, and you refused."

"But you thought I was a different girl then from what you know now. I have told you all. I—I—am—"

And here she faltered and looked down at the blades of grass she was twisting about in her hands.

"Let there be no misunderstanding between us, Nell. Let me finish the sentence for you, and don't be offended at what I say, for I speak plainly, so that you may be sure I do not deceive myself any more than you. I know now that you have parted with the greatest glory of your unmarried womanhood—that you have, what the world calls, fallen—that you lived in a state of sin for three long years, knowing it to be sin, and wished for no better lot—and that, even at this moment, you would go back to that condition if you could. Do I speak too plainly, my dear? Do I hurt you?"

Nell shook her head, but did not answer him in words.

"Well, then, you see, there is no need for you to tell me anything, and if there were the remotest chance of your being tempted to go back to that life, or if the man you cared for were in a position to marry you, I would not dare to ask you to share my lot. But there is no chance of either of these things occurring to you. The only future I can see before you is to live in this simple place, where you will have no distraction from your sad..."
thoughts, and where, maybe, you will eventually die, from fretting after the impossible, or from remorse for that which can never be undone again. If you can make up your mind to leave England with me, I think I can save you much of this. I think I can lead your thoughts to dwell on something better than your past life, and renovate your health by diverting them. I think that, with the help of God and time, I may be able to show you a way out of all this terrible trouble that bids fair to blight your youth, and live, perhaps, to hear you acknowledge that it was permitted in mercy to make you better able to sympathize with the sin and sufferings of your fellow-creatures. This is what I hope for, Nell, but I may be presumptuous in hoping it, after all."

"And you would make me your wife, Hugh, knowing all and hating all, as you do! O it is impossible! You are too good for me. I am not worthy to marry you—I told you so from the first."

"We need not talk of worthiness or unworthiness to one another," answered Hugh; "we are man and woman, and I love you. That is quite enough. The matter lies between ourselves alone. No one else will ever hear of it."

"Ah, Hugh, forgive me, but I don't love you! Therein lies all the difference. I will not deceive you in the slightest particular. My heart still clings to and is wrapt up in this—this—man. I cannot forget him. I cannot unlove him. For three long, happy years he taught me to regard him as my husband; and the fact that he never married me in church makes no difference to my affection. I am sorry—I grieve deeply, deeply, night and day, that he has left me in so cruel a manner, but, still, I love him. I am more like a widow than a wicked girl. I suppose it is part of my wickedness—the greatest part, perhaps—that I cannot feel how wicked I have been. I only know that my husband has left me for another woman, and that he cannot have realized what my love for him was, or he never would have done it. Is that very wicked?" said Nell, as she looked up into the young man's face.

The answer he made was very different from what she expected of him.

"No, Nell, it is not wicked! If I had not known that
that was the way in which you regarded the past, I would not have asked you to be my wife. But the heart that can be so faithful to one man—the man who has betrayed it—will be as faithful to another, when once its tears are dried for the first. I, too, look on you as a widow, as something far more to be pitied than a widow. But it is all over now; my poor girl; you know that without my telling you; so, whether you can forget it or not, let me try to make the remainder of your life useful and happy. Will you, Nell?"

"O Hugh, you are too good! I never knew any one so good and kind in all my life before. If—if—we went far away from England, and all its dreadful associations, where we should hardly ever hear its name again, I think I could be happy, or, at least, contented, with you as my friend. And if, Hugh, it was some little time before I could think of you in any other light than that of a friend, you would not be angry, would you? you would be a little patient with me, and remember how much I have suffered—how hardly I have been used—until I feel as if I could never trust to a man's promise again."

"If you will come with me to South Africa and help me in my missionary work, Nell," said Hugh, as he took the listless hand hanging down by her side, and pressed it softly, "I will never ask you for the affection nor the duty of a wife till you can tell me you are ready and willing to give it me. Will you trust me so far? That, if the love I long for should never spring up in your heart for me, I will never demand it, nor worry you because it is not there, but still do my utmost to teach you how to lighten your heavy burden by working for God and God's creatures? Do you believe me? Will you trust me?"

"Yes, Hugh, yes! I will trust you through everything. And if father and mother should elect to emigrate and leave the dear old farm for good and all, why, I will go with them and you—as your wife."

And she held out her hand to him as she concluded. Hugh seized it and carried it to his lips.

"You have made me so happy!" he exclaimed. "O Nell, whether as friends or as husband and wife, you are my Nell, now, for evermore! And I will never let you go again!"
CHAPTER VII.

As Nell walked back to Panty-cuckoo Farm alone (for she would not let Hugh accompany her), she could not decide if she were pleased or sorry at what had taken place between them. Certainly, she did not realize it. She was as much Lord Ilfracombe's widow as she had been on setting out, and did not feel like the betrothed of anybody. But one thing did seem to please her—the idea of leaving England and all its sad associations behind, and going to a new country to live amidst new surroundings and new people. Her heart had been growing faint and sick with England for a long time past. To go to South Africa—to sail on the sea—to see the wondrous vegetation that adorns it, the hedges of cacti, the bowers of orange trees, the ostriches and the gorillas—all the wonders, in fact, of which she had read in the books which Hugh had lent her—this was what she thought of most, as she wended her way slowly homeward. If an occasional remembrance struck her, that they could not be enjoyed without the accompaniment of Hugh's society, she put it from her with a slight frown, and fell to thinking of the other instead. Hugh had said he would not worry her; that she should do exactly as she pleased; that he would ask nothing from her till she was ready to grant it, and Hugh was a man of his word. He would not say one thing and do another. She was quite safe with him. They would go out to Africa together, and whilst he taught the men and preached to them, she would be kind and helpful to the mothers and the little black children, and show them how to make their clothes and take care of their health and cook their food. She pictured herself clad in a white dress, with a broad straw hat on, walking amongst her sable sisters, nursing them when they were sick, or joining in their merrymakings and festivities. She should forget better there, Nell said to herself, than in a country that reminded her at every turn of what she had lost. And Hugh was very
good to her, there was no doubt of that, and would guard and protect her from further evil till her life's end. He knew her secret and he did not despise her for it; that was more than she could say for anybody else. Even the servants in Grosvenor Square, over whom she had reigned supreme, had shown her, but too plainly, as soon as they dared, that they considered her a little lower than themselves. She dared not think what her father and mother and Hetty would say, if they were made cognizant of the truth. Nell knew her parents' strict ideas on propriety too well. Her mother would upbraid her for having brought the first shame into their virtuous family—her father would, in all probability, turn her out of the house, and tell her her presence contaminated both her mother and her sister. The poor, when virtuous, are very virtuous indeed. They cannot understand the temptations of the upper classes and those who are thrown in contact with them, because they are not subjected to the same themselves. What workingman has the leisure to go after his neighbor's wife? When his day's labor is over, he is too tired to go courting, to say nothing of the fact that his neighbor's task is over at the same time, and he is keeping safe guard over his sheepfold. No; her own people would show no sympathy for her disgrace, Nell was quite aware of that—Hugh, who was so good himself and a minister of the gospel, was the only one she would have dared tell her story to, and he could so far overlook it as to wish to make her his wife. She owed Hugh something, and some day, perhaps, she might repay the debt. At present, however, what had passed between them was to remain with themselves. She had made him promise that. She felt, if it were made public property, she could never get out of it again. What with the Owens and the Llewellyns, she would be forced into a marriage, to think of which made her shudder. Things must go on exactly as usual, till she knew what was going to happen at Panty-cuckoo Farm, and then, if her father decided to emigrate (which was by no means likely at present), it would be time for her to make up her mind. Meanwhile, it all seemed a long way off, and Nell felt easier for the concession she had accorded Hugh. She had experienced so many qualms as to whether
she had been wise in placing confidence in him; but now there was no doubt that he would respect her secret for his own sake, as well as for hers. So she went back to Pantycuckoo Farm in better spirits than she had displayed for some time past, and found her mother in close converse with Mrs. Hody, the housekeeper, from Usk Hall. The two women had tea spread before them and were evidently going in for a regular “confab.”

“Going to raise the rents again,” old Mrs. Hody was saying, as Nell walked into the room. “Well, I never. I wonder Mr. Bastian, the steward, didn’t tell me of it. I expect he was too much ashamed. Not that it’s his doing, poor man. He can only follow the master’s lead. But, dear me, Mrs. Llewellyn, it’s easy to guess who is at the bottom of it. It’s my lady’s high jinks, and no mistake. It would take twice Sir Archibald’s money to cover them. Now, there’s all new papering to be put up in the bedrooms. I’m sure, the paper was good enough for anybody. It’s not been up more than a couple o’ years, but there’s to be a grand party at the hall this summer, and, I suppose, nothing is too good for ’em.”

“When are the family coming home, Mrs. Hody?” asked Nell.

“Next month, my lass, and you’d better get your best gowns ready, for there’s to be a power of young gentlemen with them, and no mistake. I’ve just been talking to your mother here, about her rooms. I wish she could let us have the use of four, just for a month or two, for where I’m to put them all, I don’t know.”

“But it is impossible, Mrs. Hody, or I’d willingly oblige you. But you know I couldn’t do it, even before my Nell came home, and it is more impossible than ever, now.”

“I could lend you the furniture,” said the housekeeper, coaxingly, “if that’s the obstacle. We’ve got enough stowed away, at the top of the house, to furnish five or six rooms. We make up sixteen beds ourselves, but they’ll be all full. Whatever they can want with such a heap of guests, beats me. I’ve been up the village this afternoon, to see if the Wilkins’ or Turners’ girls were at home, for we shall want extra help; but, like my luck, they’re all in service.”
“Perhaps our Nell, here, might be of use to you, Mrs. Hody,” interposed Mrs. Llewellyn. “She’s been used to service, you know, and I guess she’s a good hand at it. What say, Nell? Will ye go up to the hall, and help Mrs. Hody when the folks arrive?”

Nell grew scarlet. What if some of the “folks” should have seen her in London, and recognize her?

“O no, mother,” she exclaimed, shrinking back. “I couldn’t. I don’t know enough about it. I’ve never been in any place, remember, except in the nursery, and then as housekeeper. I have never done any housework, or cooking.”

Mrs. Hody looked at the girl’s beautiful face, suspiciously.

“You’re very young for a housekeeper, especially since you can have had no previous experience. Who engaged you for the place?”

“Lord Ilfracombe,” replied Nell, timidly—she always became timid when the Earl was alluded to.

“And what aged man was he, my dear?” continued Mrs. Hody.

“O I don’t know—somewhere between twenty and thirty, I suppose; quite young, of course; but I hardly ever saw him. He was often absent from home.”

“And how did the servants like taking their orders from such a lass as you? Didn’t they give you trouble sometimes?” went on her inquisitor.

“O no, they were all old servants. They knew their duty,” said Nell, confusedly; and then she added, to hide her embarrassment; “but do tell me, Mrs. Hody, the names of some of the visitors you are expecting. It is such an event to see strangers in Usk. Are there lords and ladies amongst them?”

“Lords and ladies, my dear? Why, they’re most all lords and ladies this time, asked on purpose to meet a royal prince, who has condescended to stay for a week with Sir Archibald. Lor! what a fuss my lady will make over him, to be sure. I expect she’s half wild with joy that he is coming. And there’ll be more cards and high play than ever, I suppose, and turning night into day, as I’ve just been telling your good mother. No one in bed till two, or
three, in the morning, and candles left guttering all over
the tablecloths, and wine spilt over the carpets, and there,
it makes me sick to talk of it. I do declare, if the play
goes on this time, as it did last year, I shall give Sir Archi-
bald warning. It's scandalous. I did hear as one poor
man—Captain Trelany was his name—was quite ruined by
it, and has been obliged to sell out of his regiment in con-
sequence, and go abroad. Such a wicked thing for a man
of Sir Archibald's age to encourage in his house; but there,
it's all her fault. She don't go on a bit like a married lady,
and I don't care who hears me say so. A running after
gents as she does, screaming and laughing like a school
girl, and driving over the place like a mad woman. I'm
sure I wish, sometimes, I'd never set eyes on her face.”

“Ah, I'm glad our Nell has nothing to do with such,”
said Mrs. Llewellyn, “for it must be a bad example for a
young girl. My daughters have been brought up steady
and respectable, and if I thought they would ever take to
such ways, it would break my heart.”

“What gentlemen are you going to send to mother, Mrs.
Hody?” said Nell, to turn the conversation.

“I don't know yet, my dear; but they are sure to be
bachelors, so don't you listen to any nonsense they may
say to you. Young gentlemen are not half particular
enough in these days. They talk a lot of rubbish to a
pretty girl and mean nothing by it, whilst she, maybe,
takes it all for gospel truth, and cries her eyes out when
she finds it was only their fun. Men always have been
took, and always will be took, by a pretty face, to the end
of time, and think it's an honor for any poor girl to receive
notice from them; but don't you believe nothing they may
say to you, Nell, for gentlemen marry for money nowadays
and nothing else, it strikes me.”

But, at this adjuration, Mrs. Llewellyn ruffled up her
feathers, like an old hen when her chickens are attacked.

“You needn't come for to give such advice to any girl of
mine, Mrs. Hody,” she exclaimed, quite hotly, “for it isn't
needed! Believe any rubbish a gentleman born might say
to her! I should think not, indeed! Nell is much too sen-
sible for that. She knows that gentlemen's compliments
mean no good for poor girls, and would not encourage such
a thing for a moment. My lasses are not like the Simpsons, Mrs. Hody, nor yet the Manleys. They've never been allowed to run loose for any one to talk to, but been reared in a God-fearing way and taught that His eye is on them everywhere. There's no occasion for you to caution them, I can assure you. I would rather see Nell stretched dead at my feet than think her capable of such folly. Why, who knows what it might lead to? Gentlemen have flattering tongues, sometimes, for country girls, and put all sorts of silly ideas into their heads. If I thought our Nell would even speak to such lodgers as you may choose to send us, Mrs. Hody, I wouldn't let my rooms to you, not if you gave me ten pounds a week for them, there!"

And Mrs. Llewellyn, quite exhausted by her efforts, stopped talking and wiped her steaming face round with her apron.

"O mother, dear, why make so much of it?" said Nell, with cheeks of crimson. "I am sure Mrs. Hody never thought that I or Hetty would behave ourselves in an unseemly way with your lodgers. It was only a kindly caution on her part. And you need have no fear for me, believe me."

"No, indeed, Mrs. Llewellyn," interposed the housekeeper, anxious to make peace with her hostess; "I only put in my little word on account of your Nell here being so handsome, and I knowing but too well what some of the gentlemen as come to the Hall are. Why, didn't one of 'em wrong poor little Katie Brown only last autumn twelvemonth, stuffing the poor child's head up with some nonsense about marriage not being necessary, and that he'd stick to her all his life, and then going off when the shooting was over, and leaving her with a baby at her back. Tom Brown was after bringing an action against the gentleman—Mr. Frank Leyton it was—and getting some money out of him for his daughter's shame; but the lawyer advised him not, for there was no evidence except Katie's word, and that wouldn't be enough in a court of justice, he said. I've taken good care not to have any pretty girls about the Hall since; and if your Nell had come up to help me, I would have kept her out of their way, for such a set of unprincipled vagabonds I never see before!"
“No, thank you, Mrs. Hody,” replied Mrs. Llewellyn, grandly; “no amount of wages would make me send a girl of mine up to the Hall after what you’ve told me. My daughters have been very humbly born and bred, but they are good, virtuous lassies, though, perhaps, I should not be the one to say it. It would break my heart if I could think them capable of taking up with folks as never meant to marry them; and as for their father, well, I do believe he’d take a gun and shoot ’em if he knew of it. So our Nell she’ll keep down to Panty-cuckoo Farm, if you please, whilst your family’s at home, and do her duty by keeping the lodgers’ rooms clean and tidy, instead of making the acquaintance of their occupants.”

“There, there, mother, say no more about it, pray,” cried Nell, in real distress, as she carried off the tea tray, in order to hide her burning cheeks. It was such conversations as these that made her fearful to think what might happen if her secret ever became known to her parents—which made her contemplate the thought of South Africa with something very much like gratitude, and even remember the condition attached to it, without a shudder. She had quite made up her mind, by this time, that she should never see the Earl of Ilfracombe again. She had never heard him mention Usk, nor even Wales. It was not likely, in her simple ideas, that he would ever find his way there—she thought that they were as widely separated, as if the sea divided them. She had but two alternatives: either to end her days at Panty-cuckoo Farm, in the maddeningly quiet manner she was passing them now, or to become Hugh Owen’s wife, and go away with him, far, far from everything that could possibly remind her of the happy, thoughtless time she had believed would never end; and, of the two, the latter appeared to be the better to her. Yet not without her parents. That was, of course, plainly understood between Hugh and herself. But her father still talked despondingly of his prospects, and of the ultimate necessity of his making some change, and Nell seemed to see the future looming before her, even though it was as yet no larger than a man’s hand. Hugh Owen had resumed his visits to the farm, much to the content of Mrs. Llewellyn, and sometimes he and Nell took a stroll together, in
the summer evenings. Only as friends, though. Notwithstanding the half promise she had made him, Nell would not permit him to consider himself anything more than her friend, until the matter was finally settled between them, and the young man was quite content it should be so. Perhaps he required a little time, also, to recover the great shock experienced on hearing Nell's story, and preferred to gain her complete confidence and friendship, before asking for any closer privilege. But he was happy in knowing that she trusted him, and never doubted but that the end for both of them would be a perfect union.

So the time went on, until May was over, and Mrs. Hody announced that she would require Mrs. Llewellyn's bedrooms, for two gentlemen, on the following day. The task of preparing them was confided to Nell. There was no rough work to be done—Mrs. Llewellyn's rooms being always kept in spick and span order—but the linen sheets had to be taken out of the old walnut-wood press, where they had lain for the last year between sprigs of sweet lavender, and aired before the kitchen fire, and the creases ironed out before they were put upon the beds. Then the fair, white toilet covers, trimmed with lace made by the farmer's great-grandmother, were spread upon the dressing tables, and chest of drawers, and every speck of dust flicked off the polished furniture. Clean lace curtains were hung before the windows, about which clambered the honeysuckles and roses, which poor Nell used to see in her London dreams, and before which lay the beds of flowers which adorned the side of the farm-house. These two rooms, as has been said before, lay apart from the rest of the domain, and opened into the bricked passage at the back of the parlor. They had a little private entrance of their own; and when they were occupied, the lodgers were allowed to come in and out, as they chose. This was absolutely necessary with the guests of Sir Archibald Bowmant, as the revelries of Usk Hall were kept up so late, that the Llewellyns could not possibly have sat up for them. So, in that primitive place, where latch-keys were unknown, and robbery was unheard of, the simple farmers left their side-doors unfastened, and scarcely ever set eyes on their lodgers. When the two sleeping-chambers were
clad in their white adornments, Nell fancied they looked too cold and colorless; so she fetched some old-fashioned vases of blue china from her mother's store closet, and filled them with roses and lilies, overshadowed by graceful branches of crimson fuchsias, and tufts of sword grass. She placed one upon each toilet table, and heaved a sigh to see how pure and sweet and clean the rooms looked, like an unstained conscience in the bosom of a child.

"Nell, Nell," called her mother, from the parlor, "open the side door, there's a good lass. There's one of the Hall gardeners, bringing over the gentlemen's luggage."

Nell did as she was desired, and encountered a man with some portmanteaux, and bags and plaid, in a wheelbarrow, standing outside the door.

"These are the things, miss, of the gents as is to sleep here," he said.

"All right. Bring them in," was the reply.

The man brought the articles in, one by one, on his shoulders, and heaped them all down in the first room.

"But, stay," exclaimed Nell; "some must go in the other room. What are the gentlemen's names?"

"Sure, I don't know, miss. All I was told was to bring the luggage over here."

Nell examined the portmanteaux first. On one were the initials M. L.; on the other, J. S. P. One bag had M. L. on it; the other was blank. The two bundles of plaid and umbrellas were not addressed at all.

"Take that portmanteau and that bag," said Nell, intimating the two marked M. L., "into the next room and leave the others here. The gentlemen can sort their own plaid when they come."

The man did as he was told and withdrew, as Mrs. Llewellyn came bustling into the room to see if the luggage betokened wealth or not.

"Nice portmantles, ain't they, Nell?" she remarked, as she examined the locks and leather. "Lor! what a lot of money young gentlemen do spend on themselves! M. L.—I fancy I've seen him before. I think that must be Mr. Martin Lennox, who was down the year before last. Such a nice, free-spoken young man, and will be an earl some day, they told me. J. S. P.;" she went on, looking at the other port-
manteau—"I've never seen that before. I wonder what it stands for—J. S. P.?"

"What letters did you say?" asked Nell, curiously.

"J. S. P., my dear. John something, I suppose. However, it don't matter to us, so long as they don't make too much noise when they come home at night. There was one gentleman we had once who was dreadful. He wasn't content with singing all sorts of songs as soon as he got into his room, but he must go in for dancing, and he used to make such a row and keep it up so late, that at last father and I could stand it no longer and were obliged to speak to Sir Archibald. There was no rest for any one; and when you have to be up at five o'clock, that's no joke. So Sir Archibald was very good about it, and sent us a quieter gentleman instead."

But Nell had heard nothing of her mother's discourse. She was kneeling down by the portmanteau marked J. S. P. and examining it all over:

"What do you see there, my lass?" said Mrs. Llewellyn.

"What's the matter with it? Anything gone wrong?"

"No, mother, nothing, nothing!" replied the girl, as she rose to her feet again. She was wondering what there was in the stranger's portmanteau that seemed so familiar to her—where she could have seen it before—for what name the initials, J. S. P., stood. The intermediate letter prevented her grasping the truth at once. She had never associated it with the other two. But something about the luggage seemed to bring an old memory with it, and made her feel uneasy. Could it possibly belong to some one whom she had met in Grosvenor Square or at Thistlemere?—any one who might recognize her as having been in Lord Ilfracombe's household? The thought made her turn cold with apprehension.

"Both those bundles of shawls can't belong to one gentleman, Nell," said her mother, presently; "come and take me into the other room. Aye, but that's a beauty! And what a pretty plaid, too, green and orange and blue! Wouldn't I like just such another to keep my feet warm when father drives me to market at Newport! Carry it carefully, lass. Don't let the straps get loose, or maybe the gentleman will be annoyed."
But Nell had already let the plaid of green and orange and blue fall to the ground. She recognized it now; she recognized the initials also. They both belonged to Mr. John Portland. The thought made her head whirl! She sat down on the floor to recover herself.

"Eh, Nell, my lass, but you’re faint!" cried her mother. "Don’t sit on the bed, child, for mercy’s sake! You’ll ruin the look of the sheets, but get into the parlor as quick as you can. Why, what ails you? You were looking ever so well this morning."

"Yes, mother, and I’m all right now," said Nell, as she made an effort to raise herself. "The day’s warm, you know, and I’m only a little tired. I’ll be better when I’ve had my dinner. I don’t think there’s anything more to be done to the rooms now, so I’ll go and look after my own," and so she escaped to the shelter of her bedroom.

But when she had time to consider the scare she had received, she was ready to call herself a fool for having been frightened so easily.

"The initials are certainly his," she thought, "and I’m almost sure he had a plaid something like that one; but, after all, I cannot be certain, and the initials, J. P., might fit half a hundred names. John Platt or James Philpott or Joseph Plowden. It is silly of me to make sure they belong to Mr. Portland until I have better proof. What should he be doing here in Usk? I never heard him mention the place nor the name of Sir Archibald. I saw so much of him, they would have been sure to crop up some time or other. Oh, I have been frightening myself with a bogey, I am sure I have! How weak my nerves must have become! I was never like this in the old days!" and Nell heaved a deep sigh as she spoke.

Still, as the day drew to a close and the owners of the portmanteaux might be expected to arrive at any moment to dress for dinner, she grew so nervous she could not stay in the house. The first person she encountered outside it was Hugh Owen, come to see if she would go for a country walk with him.

"No," said Nell, decidedly, "I can’t walk to-night. Mother wants me, and I have work to do indoors."

"Have you heard that all the company’s arrived at the
Hall?" demanded Hugh—"six carriages full, the gardener told me, and as many more expected to-morrow."

"Of course, I know it," replied the girl, petulantly; "we've two of them coming to sleep at the farm to-night. Do you know who they are?"

"No, I heard no names, except those of Sir Archibald and Lady Bowmant. What is it that is keeping you indoors, Nell?" asked Hugh.

"Nothing that concerns you," she answered, shortly.

He looked surprised at her manner, but did not notice it openly.

"I thought, if it wouldn't take you long, you might come out a little later. A walk would do you good. You are looking very pale."

"No, I shall not go out this evening," she replied; "I'm tired and want to be quiet and by myself."

"That means I'm to go, then, dear?" he said, wistfully.

"That's as you please, Hugh. Mother's indoors and always glad to see you; you know that without my telling you; but I'm too busy to have any more time to spare. Good-night!"

She held out her hand to him in token of farewell, and he was fain to accept it and take his leave of her. But, intuitively, he felt more upset than the occasion demanded. He walked on further towards a neighboring village, and did not return till an hour later. Then he distinguished, in the gleaming, a white dress cross the road, and go towards the Hall by way of the fields. Hugh felt sure that the dress belonged to Nell, and yet she had told him she should not leave the farm that night. And what should she want up at the Hall, too, just as the family had returned to it, when she never went near Mrs. Hody for weeks together when the house was empty. Hugh puzzled over this enigma for a long time without coming to a satisfactory solution; but he turned into Panty-cuckoo Farm just to see if his suspicions were correct. Meanwhile, Nell was creeping up to the Hall by a back way to gain an audience of old Mrs. Hody while the family was at dinner. She felt she must know the best or the worst before she slept that night.

"Mrs. Hody," she said, as she burst in upon that worthy, making a comfortable tea off all the tid-bits that
came down from her master's table, "mother sent me up to ask you if the gentlemen will take tea or coffee in the morning."

"Lor! my dear, neither, I should say. What will they want with troubling your mother about such things? If they've been used to it, her ladyship will order me to send it down for them from the Hall. I wonder whatever put such an idea into her head."

"O she thought it best to make sure," replied the girl; "and, please, what are their names?"

"The gentlemen's names? Why, one is the Honorable Mr. Lennox and the other is a Mr. Portland."


"Yes, my girl, I'm quite sure. Mr. John Portland, though I've never seen him at the Hall before. He comes from London, I believe. Sir Archibald's always picking up strangers and bringing them here to eat their heads off, at his expense. Well, some folks have queer notions of pleasure, haven't they? O you're off! Well, give my respects to your mother, and tell her to mind and keep all her spare cream and chickens for the Hall, for I'll want every thing she can send me."

"Yes, yes, I will tell her," replied Nell, in a muffled voice, as she turned away, repeating in her inmost heart: "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

As she walked into the farm parlor she encountered Hugh Owen, who looked at her through and through.

"Well, my lass," began Mrs. Llewellyn, "here's Hugh waiting for you, you see, so I'm glad you're come. He's been main patient, sitting here for the best part of an hour."

"Well, good-night!" said Nell, making for the room that led to her chamber.

"Why, won't you stop and talk to him a bit, now you have come?" remonstrated her mother.

"I have already told Hugh that I have no time for talking to him to-night," replied Nell, without arresting her footsteps.

"And you told me, also, that you were not going to leave the farm to-night, Nell," said the young man, with the least bit of reproach in his tone.
She turned round on him with unnecessary fierceness.

"And what is it to you if I do or not? Are you my keeper? Am I obliged to account to you for my actions? My father and my mother are the only people who have any right to find fault with me or to regulate my goings-out or comings-in, and I do not hold myself responsible to any one else. You are taking too much upon yourself, Hugh! For the future, I shall refuse to tell you anything."

And she flew up-stairs, leaving both her mother and Hugh Owen in a state of consternation at such an unusual exhibition of temper on her part.
CHAPTER VIII.

Christmas was over; the Countess Dowager, and the Ladies Devenish had taken their departure from Thistlemere; the weather was inclement, and a great deal of time had to be spent indoors; which made Nora often wish that she and her husband were alone. One day she expressed something of the kind to him. She said:

"I thought people usually kept their country seats for the purposes of retirement; but we have never been alone since we came here."

Ilfracombe laughed.

"Why, my darling, what do you call us at the present moment? We couldn't well be much more alone."

"Mr. Portland is here," replied the Countess.

"Old Jack. You don't call him anybody, surely. He's as much at home at Thistlemere as we are. I wish he would live here altogether. I don't know what I shall do when he does go. I shall be lost without my old chum to smoke with and talk to."

"I don't think you need anticipate any such calamity," said Nora, with something of her old, sharp manner. "Mr. Portland does not appear to have the slightest intention of moving."

"He was thinking of it, though. He had a letter yesterday which, he said, obliged him to return to town; but I persuaded him to write instead. It would be awfully dull for me if he went away, just at this time, when there is nothing going on."

"Complimentary to me," retorted the young Countess, with a shrug.

"Now, my darling, you know what I mean. You are all the world to me—a part of myself—but you can't sit up till the small hours, playing billiards and smoking cigars with me."

"No; I draw the line at cigars, Ilfracombe."

"And then, how many rainy and dirty days there are,
when you only feel inclined to sit over the fire, and toast your pretty little feet. What would become of me then, if Jack were not here to go potting rabbits, or turning the rats out of the barns with the terriers. The country is so frightfully dull at this time of year, you would be bored to death with only me to talk to."

"Do you think so, Ilfracombe?"

"I feel sure of it. And how should we pass the evenings without our whist? Babbage is the only man within hail of us, who thinks it worth his while to come over for a game; so, if Jack were not good enough to exile himself for the pleasure of our company, we should be obliged to import some one else, who would probably not play half so well."

Lord and Lady Ilfracombe were riding together at the time of this conversation, walking their horses slowly round the lanes about Thistlemere, for Nora was not an experienced horsewoman. She had had no opportunity of either riding or driving in Malta, and her husband was employing his leisure by teaching her something of both arts. She was a pupil to be proud of; plucky in the extreme, and only a little reckless, and disposed to imagine she could do it all at once, which kept the Earl on constant tenter-hooks about her. As he finished speaking to her now, she exclaimed, rather impatiently:

"O very well. Let us say no more about it," and struck the spirited little mare she was riding sharply across the neck with her whip.

The animal started, and set off suddenly at a hand gallop, nearly unseating her rider by the rapidity of her action. The Earl followed, in an access of alarm, until he saw that the mare had settled down into a moderate canter again.

"Nora, my darling," he exclaimed, as he came up with her, "you mustn't do that. Leila won't stand it. She will throw you some day, to a dead certainty. You gave me a pretty fright, I can tell you. What should I do if you were thrown?"

"Pick me up again, I hope," replied the Countess, laughing, as if it were an excellent joke.

"Yes; but with a broken limb, perhaps; and fancy, what
my remorse would be if that happened. I should never forgive myself for having mounted you on the beast. But she really is a good-tempered thing, if you know how to take her."

"Just like her mistress," said Nora, smiling. "But, seriously, Ilfracombe, I will be more careful. I don't want to break my leg before I am presented at court."

"Nor after it, I hope, my darling. But walk Leila, now, there's a good child, and let her simmer down a little. You've made me feel just as I do when I think I've missed the trick."

"I believe you are fonder of playing cards than anything, Ilfracombe," said Nora, slowly.

"I am—except you! But they are so jolly—there's so much excitement about cards. They keep a man alive."

"But, Ilfracombe, why need we always play for such high stakes? Do you know I lost thirty pounds at 'Sandown' yesterday evening?"

"Did you, dearest? Are you cleaned out? I will let you have some more as soon as we reach home."

"No, it is not that. It would not signify once in a way, perhaps, but it is the same thing every night. It seems an awful waste of money."

"Not if you enjoy it, dear. We must pay for our whistle, you know. Cards would be no fun without the stakes. And somebody must lose."

"Yes, and somebody must win. Only, as it happens, it is always the same somebody, which doesn't seem fair."

"Nora, what do you mean?"

"Just what I say, Ilfracombe. I lose every night, so do you, so does Lord Babbage; and the only person who wins is Mr. Portland. All the money seems to go into his pocket."

"O Nora, my darling! This is not fair of you. You are prejudiced against my old chum; I have seen that from the beginning; but to say that dear old Jack wins all the stakes, night after night, is as good as saying—O I am sure you cannot mean it—you cannot think of the meaning of what you say."

"My dear Ilfracombe, there is no meaning about it. I am only speaking the plain truth. I've seen it for a long
time. Doubtless, Mr. Portland is the best player of the four, and that is the reason; but it has struck me as rather remarkable. And it seems so strange, too, that friends should want or like to pocket each other's money. Why can't we play for the love of the game? It would be quite as interesting, surely."

"No, no, child, it wouldn't! Whoever heard of such a thing as grown men sitting down seriously to play for love?" cried the Earl, merrily. "That's only school-girls' games. And I wonder to hear you, Nora, who are such a little woman of the world, suggesting such a thing. I should have thought you liked staking your money as well as any one."

"Perhaps it is because I am a woman of the world that I don't like to see my husband's money wasted. No income, however large, can stand such a strain long. Besides, I know it is not only cards on which you bet with Mr. Portland. You go to races with him, and lose a lot of money there. Mr. Castelon told me so."

"It is not true, Nora; and Castelon had better mind his own business. Everybody must lose occasionally; but I always follow Jack's lead, and he's as safe as the church clock. And, after all, my dear girl, I'd as soon the tin went in old Jack's pocket as my own. He's awfully hard up, sometimes, and if one can't share some of one's good things with one's best friend, I don't know what's the use of them."

"Well, leave a little for me," cried Nora, gaily; and her husband's answer should have at least satisfied her that she would always be his first care.

But she was not satisfied with regard to the nightly games of cards. She watched the players more closely after this conversation than before, and decided within herself that she had been correct, and Jack Portland was by far the heaviest and most frequent winner. One day, when they were alone together, she could not help congratulating him, in a sarcastic manner, on his continual run of good luck. He guessed at her meaning in a minute.

"Do you mean to infer that I cheat?" he asked her, abruptly.

Then Nora felt a little ashamed of herself, and did not know what to reply.
“O no, of course not. How could you think of such a thing? Only it is evident that you are a far better player than Lord Babbage or Ilfracombe, and, to my mind, the odds are very much against them. As for poor me, you have ruined me already. I have lost all my pin-money for the next three months.”

“Nonsense!” he said, rudely (Mr. Portland could be exceedingly rude to her when they were alone). “You know you can get as much money out of Ilfracombe as you can possibly want. The man is infatuated with you. More fool he. But he'll find out how much your love is worth some day.”

“Perhaps you intend to enlighten him?” said her ladyship. She could not resist letting fly her little shafts at him, whatever the consequences might be.

“Perhaps I do, if you egg me on to it,” was Mr. Portland’s reply. “But seriously, my lady, don’t you attempt to come between his lordship and myself, or you may rue the day you did it. I am a vaurien—adventurer—swindler—what you like. I’m not afraid of you or your tongue, because I hold the trump card, and should have no hesitation in playing it. But my income, though tolerably expansive, is a fluctuating one, and I am compelled to eke it out as best I can. I amuse my friends, and I live, chiefly, at their expense. Lord Ilfracombe is, luckily for me, one of my best and greatest chums, so I cling to him like a double sweet pea. Until you came in the way, there has never been a suspicion cast on the honor of my intentions—the disinterestedness of my friendship. See that you don’t do it, that’s all.”

“And, what if I did?” asked Nora, defiantly, with her head well up in the air. Mr. Portland moved a few steps closer to her.

“I would deliver those letters of yours into Ilfracombe’s hands within the hour,” he said, between his teeth.

Nora quailed before his glance; but her voice was steady, as she replied:

“You would not. You dare not. You would ruin your- self for ever, and be pointed at in society as a scoundrel and a blackmailer.”

“Never mind what the world would say of me. Think only of what it would say of you.”
"It could not say anything," she retorted, with the boldness of despair. "There would be nothing for it to say. There is no harm in those letters. I should not mind if my husband read them to-morrow."

"Wouldn't you?" said Jack Portland, with open eyes. "Then I'll show them to him before he is twelve hours older."

"No, no," said Nora, quickly; "you would not do so mean an act, surely. You must have some instincts of a gentleman left in you. Remember, under what circumstances they were written, and that I thought at the time I loved you."

"I suppose you did," replied Mr. Portland; "but they are delicious reading, all the same. I read passages from them, once, to a select party of my men friends, and they said they would never have guessed they were the productions of a young lady. They voted they would have been warm even from a barmaid."

"You did not. You cannot have been such a blackguard," exclaimed Lady Ilfracombe so shrilly that he laid his hand upon her arm to caution her she might be overheard. "You have promised to give me those letters back, over and over again, and you have not kept your word. I will wait no longer, but have them at once. I insist upon it. Do you hear me? I will stand this treatment from you no longer."

"O I hear, fast enough, and I'm very much afraid that everybody else in the house, including Lord Ilfracombe, will hear also, if your ladyship is not a little more guarded."

"But you promised—you promised—" she continued, vehemently, "and now you threaten to break your promise. You are no gentleman, Mr. Portland. The lowest man on earth would degrade himself by such vile conduct."

"I daresay," he answered, coolly, "perhaps he would. But your behavior is enough to make a saint forget his natural instincts. You remind me that I promised to return you your letters. I know I did, and if you had treated me decently since coming here, I might have kept my promise. But I won't give them to you, now. I will only sell them."
"What can you possibly mean?" exclaimed the Countess. "Am I to buy back my own letters? Well, I will. What price do you ask for them?"

She was standing in the oriel window of the drawing-room, most becomingly dressed in a gown of brown velvet, that seemed to match her eyes, and set off the pearly whiteness of her skin; and, as she put the above question, she curled her upper lip, and threw such an air of disdain into her expression, that she looked more charming than usual.

"Don't look like that," said Portland, coming nearer to her, "or you will aggravate me to kiss you."

The indignant blood rushed in a flood of crimson to Nora's face and forehead, until it nearly forced tears from her eyes.

"How dare you? How dare you?" she panted, as she retreated as far as she could from him.

"How dare I?" he repeated. "That wasn't the way your ladyship used to receive the same proposition when we sat together under the shade of the orange trees in Malta, a couple of years ago. Was it now?"

"I do not know. I cannot remember. I only know that your presence now is hateful to me. What sum do you require for those letters? If it were half our fortune I would give it to you sooner than be subjected to further insult. Tell me how much, at once. I will sell all my jewels if I cannot raise the money otherwise."

"No, no! I'm not going to press you quite so hard as all that, Nora. I don't want your jewels, my dear," replied Jack Portland, with offensive familiarity. "My price is—your silence!"

"Silence about what? Do you imagine I am likely to talk about a matter which I would expunge with my life-blood if I could?"

"You mistake me. By your silence I mean that you must no longer interfere, as you seem inclined to do, between your husband and myself. You must not try to separate us in any way—not in our friendship, nor our pursuits, nor our sports. We like to play cards together—"

"You like, you mean," she interposed, sarcastically.
"Plait-il!" acquiesced Jack Portland, with an expressive shrug; "at any rate, we have been used to play cards and attend races and generally enjoy ourselves as bons camarades, and your ladyship will be good enough not to attempt to put an end to these things—not to remark, in that delicately sarcastic way of yours, that it is always your humble servant who appears to win. Do I make myself perfectly understood?"

"Perfectly," said Nora; "and if I consent to this, what then?"

"Why, that packet of charming letters—twenty-five in all, if I remember rightly—which have afforded me so much consolation under our cruel separation, and which would prove, I feel sure, such very interesting reading for Lord Ilfracombe, shall remain in my custody, safe from all prying eyes except mine."

"But you promised to return them to me," argued Nora; and then, with the greatness of the stake at issue before her eyes, and forgetting everything but that she was at the mercy of the man before her, the unhappy girl descended to entreaty. "O Mr. Portland—Jack!" she stammered, "for God's sake—for the sake of the past, give me back those letters!"

"How nice it is to hear you call me 'Jack,;'" said Mr. Portland, gazing boldly at her; "it almost reconciles me to the great loss I experienced in you. When you call me 'Jack' I feel as if I could refuse you nothing."

"Then will you give them to me?"

"Certainly, ma chère; haven't I said so a dozen times? Only you must positively wait until I return to town. You women are so terribly unreasonable. And you, for your part, promise never to interfere between my old friend Ilfracombe and myself, and sometimes to call me 'Jack,' for the sake of the past?"

Lady Ilfracombe was shivering now, as if she had received a cold water douche. She realized what being in the power of this man meant—that he would torture her as a cat tortures a mouse, until he had bent her in every way to do his will.

"I promise," she said, in a low voice; "but if you gentlemen will play for such high stakes, you must not expect
me to join your game. You would ruin me in no time; as it is, I am regularly 'cleaned out.'"

"I would rather you did not join it," replied Mr. Portland, seriously; "ladies are seldom any good at whist, and I would rather play dummy any day. I suppose Ilfracombe will take you to Newmarket and Epsom with him, but you will understand nothing of the races, so I make no objection to that. By the way, have you yet mentioned this matter of our playing high to him?"

"I told him I thought the stakes were high for a private game. But he contradicted me, and said it was no fun playing except for money."

"I should think not. However, don't speak to him of such a thing again, please. Besides, it is ridiculous. He has an ample fortune, and can afford to do as he pleases. I can't see myself why you sit in the card-room in the evenings. The drawing-room is the proper place for a lady."

"You would like to separate me from my husband altogether, I daresay," cried Nora, heatedly.

"By no manner of means. You quite mistake my meaning. Such a proceeding would distress me beyond measure. But I don't intend to give up any of the privileges which I enjoyed from Ilfracombe's intimacy before his marriage, for you. Had he married anybody else, it might have been different. But not for—you! It would be too bad to ask me to give up both my lady-love and my friend at one stroke. You will acknowledge the justice of that yourself, won't you?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know anything," replied the Countess, wearily, as she moved away. "I see that you have come into my life again to make it miserable; and if you have no honor nor generosity, there is nothing left that I can see to appeal to." And, in her heart, Nora added: "And if I could stretch you dead at my feet this moment, I would do it without a single pang!"

She was more cautious in what she said to the Earl, however, after that, and occasionally he rallied her on having got over her objection to high play. Once, when they were quite alone, she ventured to answer him:

"No, Ilfracombe, I cannot say that you are right. You must have observed that I seldom stay in the room now
when you are playing. I do not approve of such high stakes; but I do not like to interfere with your enjoyment, or to appear to know better than yourself. But you won't tell Mr. Portland I said so," she added, in a wistful tone.

Lord Ilfracombe looked surprised.

"Tell Jack, my darling? Why, of course not. All that passes between you and me is sacred. I don't think you've been looking quite up to the mark lately, Nora. I'm afraid you must find Thistlemere rather dull. I shall be glad when the time comes for us to go up to town. Then we'll see some life together, won't we?"

And Nora smiled faintly, and answered, "yes."
CHAPTER IX.

The Derby was run that year, in the last week of May. The young Countess Ilfracombe had already been presented at Court under the auspices of her mother-in-law; she had attended more than one royal function since; she had seen all that there was worth seeing, in town; and she had entertained largely at her own house in Grosvenor Square. She had been fairly launched on society, in fact; and, unlike most heroines, it had not disappointed her. Everything was new and fresh to her; everything was delightful. This was what she had longed for, and dreamed of in far-off Malta, and her letters home were full of the pleasure she was experiencing, and the honors that were paid to her. Nora felt happier, too, and more at her ease, in the company of her mother-in-law and the Ladies Devenish, and away from the close, every-day companionship of Mr. Portland, who had, at last, returned to his own chambers in the Albany. She fluttered about, from milliner to milliner—theatre to theatre—like a huge butterfly; all fashion, delicate tints, smiles, and excitement. Ilfracombe, unlike his usual taste, seemed delighted to be her cavalier on all occasions. The truth is, he was thankful to get out of the house. Fond as he, undoubtedly, was of his wife, the atmosphere of Grosvenor Square depressed him. He could not enter a single room, without being painfully reminded of Nell Llewellyn, and her devoted love for him. It had been a very real love between these two. On her side, the most unselfish, adoring, humble passion—on his, a very appreciative acknowledgment of her single-eyed affection, mingled with a great admiration of her beauty. His love for her, however, had always been mixed with a certain amount of shame and uncertainty, because he knew it was impossible it could go on forever, and he dreaded the moment when it would become imperative to tell her so. Nell had ended it all for herself, however, and but too abruptly; and now he could not sit in the rooms where they had for
so long sat together, and which she had so confidently regarded as her own, without finding his thoughts very much drawn her way, even though his lawful wife was by his side. He thought of the time when Nell first came to his house, a tall, slender girl, with a complexion like a wild rose, and beautiful, startled, hazel eyes, moist with the dews of youth. How frightened she was when he first whispered his love into her ear—how passionately remorseful when he had led her astray—how wonderfully grateful and reverential when he told her she should thenceforth reign the mistress of his heart! He looked back over the years she had managed his household for him, and could not remember one instance of her losing her temper with him—that passionate, indomitable temper, which was so quickly roused by others. How often he had wished—almost decided, to make her his wife, if only for the devoted love she bore him, but had been afraid, on consideration, of the sneers and disapproval of the world, and so had dismissed the idea from his mind. And now—well, of course, he would not change his Nora for any woman; she was a glory to him, whilst poor Nell would only have been a disgrace—still, he wished, from the bottom of his heart, that she had been more reasonable, and gone home quietly to her friends, and, by and by, married some man in her own station of life, who would have considered the settlement he wished to make on her a little fortune. Lord Ilfracombe wondered, by the way, who were Nell's friends, and where she came from. She had never mentioned her old home to him. Did they know of her sad death? he wondered, or of the circumstances that led to it? He thought not. She was not the sort of woman to betray the man she loved, even in death. She would have carried her secret with her to the grave. It was done, and it could not be undone, he would tell himself; but the thought made the house very distasteful to him. He became nervous, even timid. He did not care to enter his private rooms at dusk, and would fancy he heard a sigh, or caught sight of a shadowy form flitting by him in the gleaming. One day he called his wife "Nell." It was a fearful mistake, and his face grew crimson as he discovered it. But Nora was wonderfully calm under the little désagrement.
“Was that Miss Llewellyn’s name, Ilfracombe?” she asked, archly.

“O my love, forgive me!” cried the Earl. “What can I have been thinking of? It was the mere force of habit. You know she was here with me, and it is the first time I have been in the house since.”

“Did you think I should be angry?” asked Nora, looking back at him over her shoulder. “Surely, it is the most natural thing in the world that you should think of the poor girl. You would be a brute if you didn’t. But don’t get melancholy over it, dear boy. Come out in the park with me, or let us go down the river together. I won’t leave you moping here by yourself.”

And it was such things that made Lord Ilfracombe say (and rightly) that he had gained a wife in a thousand. He was anxious that she should accompany him to the Derby for two reasons—anxious that she should see the biggest race of the year, which, of course, she had never yet had an opportunity of doing; and anxious to let the racing world see what a charming Countess he had secured. The Dowager Lady Ilfracombe was very much against the idea, and the Ladies Devenish said it was decidedly vulgar, and not at all comme il faut.

“If Ilfracombe had taken you to Ascot, or Goodwood, it would have been different; but the Derby. Why, hardly any ladies go there. There is always such a vulgar crowd; and, coming back by the road, you are bound to be insulted.”

“Do you think so?” said Nora. “I should like to see the man who would dare to insult me, in Ilfracombe’s presence.”

“But you don’t know anything about it,” replied Lady Blanche. “The roughs who frequent the Derby course, make no difference between an Earl and anybody else. They don’t know one when they see him. And the awful people you will see on the race course; gipsies, and nigger minstrels, and low creatures of all sorts.”

“Have you ever been there yourself?” inquired Nora.

“I should hope not, indeed. I would not think of such a thing. It is no place for ladies. I can’t imagine what Ilfracombe can be thinking of to let you go.”
"Well, I suppose he knows better than either of us, Blanche, and it was his own proposal. We are going down, a large party on our drag. Lady Moberly, and the Duchess of Downshire are going with us, so I shall offend the proprieties in good company."

"O if the Duchess is going with you, it makes a difference, of course. No one has ever said a word against the Duchess, and she is, at least, fifty, so she will give a tone to the whole affair, and be a sort of chaperon for you. For, you see, Nora, though you are a Countess, you are rather young."

"I know that," retorted Nora; "but I'm getting the better of it every day."

"Well, you needn't be flippant, my dear," replied her sister-in-law, with a sniff. "Rank has its obligations, though you do not appear to think so. There might have been some excuse for your not knowing it before your marriage, but there is none now."

"No, I suppose not. All the same, I am going to the Derby this year, if I never go again."

And off ran Nora to join her husband. The Derby day was for her a complete success. She was dressed becomingly—was in good health and spirits, and in the humor to enjoy all she saw and heard. Lord Ilfracombe's drag, with its team of perfectly matched chestnuts, was one of the handsomest in the Four-in-hand Club, and had always attracted particular attention when he turned out for the annual park display. Their party consisted of the Duchess of Downshire; Lord and Lady Moberly; Miss Chetwynd, one of that season's beauties, and several bachelors, amongst whom was Mr. Jack Portland—the only drawback to Nora's enjoyment. But she was seated behind her husband and the Duchess, who occupied the box seat, and he was at the back of the coach, so that during the journey they did not exchange a word with one another. As soon as they arrived on the race course, and the horses had been taken out of the shafts, the servants spread their luncheon, and they began to have a merry time of it. Presently, Jack Portland's voice was heard, exclaiming, as he looked at some one through his field glass:

"By George! if that isn't Sir Archibald Bowmant, my
Usk friend, and his wife. I told you, Ilfracombe, didn’t I, that I’m going to spend a few weeks with them next month? They’re the best fellows in the world; awful fun; and don’t the old boy know a card when he sees it!"

"Friends of yours, Jack?" said Ilfracombe, in his hospitable way. "Ask them to come here and lunch with us, old boy, if they’re not better engaged."

"Shall I? Have I your permission, Lady Ilfracombe?" asked Mr. Portland, looking at Nora.

"Need you ask the question, Mr. Portland?" she replied, without glancing his way. "If you have my husband’s leave, you have mine."

"Thanks!" said Mr. Portland, as he descended from the coach. "They may be with another party, but I’ll just ask. I’m sure you’ll like them. Lady Bowmant is just your style."

In a few minutes he returned with his friends and introduced them to Lord and Lady Ilfracombe. Sir Archibald was a stout, florid, middle-aged man, with a jolly, good-tempered countenance, and weak, watery, blue eyes. His wife, to whom he had not been married a twelvemonth, was many years his junior, perhaps not more than five and twenty, and was as good a specimen of a fast young woman, who just contrives not to step over the rubicon, as could be found anywhere. She had been a nobody, and her head was completely turned by having become the wife of a baronet. She was decidedly pretty, with a countrified style of beauty, and she was fashionably, but not well, dressed. Her manner was effusive and her voice loud, but she was lively, sparkling and amusing. Lady Ilfracombe, though indisposed to accord her a hearty welcome, just because she had been introduced by Jack Portland, could not help thawing under her lively manner, and before long they were all on the most excellent terms.

"How good of you to ask us to luncheon, Lady Ilfracombe!" exclaimed the new-comer. "I am sure I shall never forget it. I do so admire anything like cordiality. You meet with so little of it in this country. We Englishwomen are horribly stiff, as a rule, are we not? Sir Archibald and I were admiring your drag so much. We were on the course when you drove up, just making our way to the
grand stand. It is quite a wonder we are here. We never meant to come; but I have never seen the Derby run, and Sir Archibald thought I should not go back to Wales without doing so. We drove down, but put up at the hotel. Are we not ignoramuses? I was just despairing of pushing our way through this crowd when Jack spied us out, and landed us, through your goodness, in this haven of peace."

"You have known Mr. Portland a long time, then, I suppose?" remarked Nora.

"Why? Because I called him 'Jack'? O every one calls him 'Jack,' don't they? He's a regular lady's man, is Mr. Portland, and a great favorite with my husband. He is coming to stay with us in Usk next month."

"So he told us just now."

"Yes, I am quite looking forward to it. He is such a delightful companion in the country! Do you like the country, Lady Ilfracombe? Are you fond of horses?"

"I am very fond of horses," replied Nora, smiling; "but if your question means do I ride well, I must tell you that I never mounted a horse till after my marriage, and so I am still a learner."

"O you'll be proficient in no time!" exclaimed Lady Bowmant. "Isn't it delightful? I adore riding and driving and everything connected with horses. Don't I, Sir Archibald?"

"You do, my dear," said the jolly Baronet; "that is, if adoring means riding them to death and driving over half my tenantry!" and he roared as if his wife's feats of skill were the funniest things in the world.

"Now, don't tell tales out of school, Sir Archibald," cried the lady. "You know when I hunted last season that there wasn't a woman in the field who could keep anywhere near me. And didn't I carry off three brushes? And didn't the master of the fox-hounds say I was the pluckiest horsewoman he had ever seen?"

"O yes, Dolly; no one denies your pluck, my dear. Only I wish you didn't drive your tandem over the children so often. The pounds I had to pay last year for mending babies and recouping the mothers passes belief."

"Don't you believe him, Lady Ilfracombe," said his wife,
with a saucy nod; "the old man's getting in his second
dotage and doesn't know half he says."

At this fresh sally, Sir Archibald roared again, until he
nearly choked himself over his lobster salad and champagne.

The races were now beginning in good earnest; but Nora
did not take half so much interest in them as she did in the
lively conversation of her new acquaintance, who out-talked
the Duchess and Lady Moberly and all the other ladies put
together. She was very keen on the racing, though, and
explained a great deal to Nora which she would not have
understood without her. The gentlemen of the party had
left the drag as soon as the work of the day began, and
found their way to the betting ring.

"Now, I hope my old man won't pop too much on 'Cal-
iban,'" exclaimed Lady Bowmant, a little anxiously; "for
it looks to me as if he had been a bit over-trained. I heard
Jack recommending him to put a monkey on him; but, though Jack knows a thing or two, I don't always take his
advice in racing matters. I expect it's six for himself, and
half a dozen for his friends, like most of them, eh?"

"I know so little of these things," replied Lady Ilfrac-
combe. "Is the Derby a great race for betting on?"

The other turned, and looked at her with surprise.

"Is the Derby a race for betting on?" she repeated.
"My dear Lady Ilfracombe, men lose fortunes over it.
They're mad, I tell them, perfectly mad. No one likes
spending money more than I do; but to throw it away by
the thousand! Why, it spells ruin, for the majority, that's
all."

"I hope Ilfracombe will not be reckless," said Nora,
anxiously. "I sometimes think he is a little disposed to
be so, over cards and those sorts of games."

"If he's with Jack Portland, he's bound to 'go the pace,'" returned Lady Bowmant, laughing. "Upon my word, I
sometimes think that man's mad. Have you ever seen him
at baccarat, Lady Ilfracombe?"

"Who? What?" said Nora, who was vainly trying to
follow her husband's movements. "Mr. Portland? No."

"It's a caution," said her companion. "I've had to posi-
tively drag Sir Archibald away from him, sometimes, for
fear he should get up from the table without a half-penny.
But it's a lovely game. So much excitement. We are at it, at Usk Hall, sometimes, till four in the morning. We are terrible gamblers up there."

"See!" cried the Duchess, standing up on the drag. "They're off!"

After which, they spent a couple of very fatiguing hours, watching the various races, and jotting down the first, second, and third winners on their cards, during which time the men did not come near them, so occupied were they by the business of the betting ring, and the excitement provided for them there. When it was, at last, all over, and their party returned to the drag, Nora observed that Ilfracombe was looking very flushed, and talking very fast, a sufficiently unusual circumstance with him, to attract her notice. Mr. Portland, on the contrary, seemed to take things much more coolly, whilst the Baronet had lost some of his hilariousness, and Lord Moberly was congratulating himself, that he had not been persuaded to back the favorite.

"Well, and how have you all fared?" cried the Duchess, gaily, as they came within hailing distance.

"Sir Archibald, I feel certain you have been making a fool of yourself," exclaimed his wife. "I can see it in the set of your tie. Very well. Back you go to Usk to-morrow, and you'll have to put up with mutton and potatoes till we've recouped ourselves. Now, what have you lost? Out with it!"

"Nonsense, Dolly, nonsense," replied the Baronet, as he tried to evade her scrutiny; "a mere trifle, I assure you; not worth thinking about. When did you ever know me to make a fool of myself over races?"

"Scores of times," replied her ladyship, decidedly, as she whispered in his ear. Nora did not ask any questions, nor make any remarks; but she gazed at her husband in a wistful way, as if she would read, from his features, whether he had been lucky or otherwise. Ilfracombe did not voluntarily look her way; but, after awhile, he felt the magnetism of her glance, and raised his eyes to hers. The silent anxiety he read in them seemed to annoy him. He frowned slightly, and affecting unusual hilarity, climbed to his seat, and seized the reins.
“Now, for a good scamper back to town,” he exclaimed. “We must not let the riff-raff get ahead of us, or we shall be smothered in dust. Are you tired, darling?” he continued, over his shoulder to his wife, “or would you like to go to the Oaks on Friday? What do you think of our national race course, and our national game?”

“I have been very much amused. I liked it very much,” answered Nora, in a conventional manner; but the tone of her voice did not convey much satisfaction. But as Ilfracombe and she were dressing for a big dinner party, to which they were engaged that evening, she crept to his side, and asked him, shyly:

“Did you lose much to-day, Ilfracombe? I am sure you lost, or you would have told me the amount of your winnings; but was it very much?”

“I was pretty hard hit over ‘The Cardinal,’” he answered; “but nothing to howl over.”

“Why did you take Mr. Portland’s advice?” she said. “He always makes you lose.”

“Not at all,” replied her husband. “Jack is the best adviser I have. Every one must lose at times. It’s absurd to suppose you can always win.”

“Then why doesn’t he lose also?” said Nora, boldly. “Why doesn’t he give you the same advice he follows himself?”

“My darling child, you know nothing of such matters, and I don’t want you to do so. They concern men only. And, look here, Nora, I don’t want to say anything unkind, but I would rather you did not interfere with my winnings or my losings. They are essentially my own affairs. Trust me to take care of myself. And now, if you are ready, we had better go!”

After which, Nora was sharp enough to see that she would only make a bad matter worse by attempting to set Ilfracombe against Jack Portland, and that her only plan was to watch and wait until the time came when she might be able to influence her husband openly.

He loved her, but he was too easily led by a stronger mind than his own, and he was too loyal to believe that his intimate friend, who shared all his good things at his pleasure, could plot to aggrandize himself at his expense. She
had brought it on herself, Nora said, inwardly, and she must bear the penalty as best she might.

A few days after the Derby, Sir Archibald and Lady Bowmant called upon her, and she returned their visit. She thought Lady Bowmant very clever and amusing; but she little dreamt the acquaintanceship would lead to a close and sudden intimacy. She was astonished, therefore, one morning, by her husband telling her that he had met the Baronet at his club the night before, and that he had extended a most cordial invitation for them to go down to Usk Hall during the time that Jack Portland was to be there.

"To Usk Hall?" said Nora, with surprise. "But, Ilfracombe, we do not know the Bowmants sufficiently well to go and stay with them. I have only seen her three times in all."

"What does that signify?" replied her husband. "They're awfully jolly people; you have said so yourself, and Jack says they keep it up royally at Usk Hall. The Prince of Huhm-Hessetal is to be there, and no end of nice people. You'll receive a proper invitation from Lady Bowmant tomorrow or next day, and I see no reason why we should not accept it."

"I thought you had agreed to join your mother's party at Wiesbaden?" said the Countess, dubiously.

"O hang my mother's party!" exclaimed Ilfracombe, irritably. "A lot of old fogies together. What fun should we get out of that? I only said something about seeing her there, just to quiet her. I never meant to go. Besides, we can go abroad afterwards if you wish it. But neither of us have ever seen Wales—a most beautiful country—and the Bowmants' is just the sort of house to suit us. Lots of horses for you to ride and drive, and salmon fishing for me, and—well, all I can say is, that I wish to go."

"Of course, then, we shall go," replied his wife, quietly.

But when the invitation actually arrived, she made one more appeal to the Earl, to keep her out of the way of Jack Portland.

"Ilfracombe," she said, going to seek him with the letter from Lady Bowmant in her hand, "have you quite made up your mind? Am I really to tell these people that we will go to Usk Hall and stay with them?"
"Of course! Why not? Haven't we decided to accept
the invitation?" he demanded.
"You have, I know; but I feel sure it will prove a disap-
pointment to both of us. You will call me silly, but I have
such a presentiment that this visit will end in some terrible
trouble for us. Is it only fancy, do you think?" added
Nora, with unusual softness in her voice and manner, "or
may it not be a warning for us not to go?"
"A warning! Rubbish!" exclaimed the Earl, as he
kissed her troubled eyes. "Now, my darling, you shall go,
if only to prove what a little goose you are! A warning!
I know what you're thinking of. You're afraid I shall
succumb to the charms of the fascinating Lady Bowmant.
Well, she is a flirt, there is no doubt of that, and she is set-
ting her cap at me rather hard, but don't be afraid, little
woman. Your husband is not such a fool as he looks—and
he means you to go with him to Usk Hall."
CHAPTER X.

So Lady Ilfracombe gave in with a good grace, and the note of invitation was duly answered and accepted. It was a proof of Nora's growing interest in the Earl, that she had quite left off trying to wield her power over him in little things. It was not in her nature ever to sink down into a very submissive wife—a meaningless echo of her husband—water to his wine; but she was learning to yield her own wishes gracefully in deference to his, and in this instance, as we know, she was too much afraid of Jack Portland to press the point. He had told her plainly, that if she interfered between him and Lord Ilfracombe, she would do it at her cost, and from what she had heard of the menage at Usk Hall, both from its owners and himself, she felt pretty sure their own invitation had been sent at Mr. Portland's instigation, and that he had a purpose in having it sent. He was not satisfied with having fleeced her husband all through the winter, he would drain his pockets still further at the Bowmants'; in fact, she had no doubt now, that he looked to the Earl as the chief means of his subsistence. And till she had found some way of outwitting him—until she had that packet of letters, the contents of which she so much dreaded her husband seeing—in her own hands, Nora said to herself, with a sigh, that she must endure Mr. Portland's insolence and chicanery. They had only been asked to the Hall for a week or two, and they intended to limit their visit to a week. If she could only have foreseen what that week would bring forth! It was a notable fact that Jack Portland had never tried to rouse the Countess' anger, or jealousy, by an allusion to Nell Llewellyn, and her former influence over the Earl. Indeed, he had not even mentioned her name before Nora. The reason of this was, not because he respected her wifehood, or herself, but because the remembrance of Nell was a sore one with him. He had never cared the least bit for Miss Abinger. He had thought her a very
jolly sort of girl, with plenty of "go" in her—a great flirt—very fast—very smart, and slightly verging on the improper. She was a great source of amusement to him, whilst he stayed in Malta, and he had encouraged her in all sorts of "larks," chiefly for the fun of seeing how far she would go. When their conduct had commenced to give rise to scandal in Valetta, and his sister, Mrs. Loveless, had spoken very gravely to him on the subject, he had sought to make the amende honorable, by proposing for the young lady's hand. But Sir Richard Abinger had rejected his suit with scorn. He—an impecunious adventurer, who lived from hand to mouth, and had no settled employment, presume to propose to marry his daughter Nora, and drag her down with himself—he had never heard of such a piece of impudence in his life before. So Mr. Jack Portland, having done the correct thing (as the lady said when she went to church on Sunday, and found there was to be no service), made haste out of Malta again, and the place knew him no more. The rest of the story has been told. Both of them had only been playing at love, and neither of them was hurt. Had it not been for those unfortunately bold and unmaidenly letters which remained in Mr. Portland's possession, Nora would, long ago, have forgotten all about the matter.

But there had been something in Nell Llewellyn, fallen woman though she was, that had made a much deeper impression on the heart of Mr. Portland, if, indeed, he possessed such an article. He had not proposed to marry her—it was not much in his way to consider marriage a necessary accompaniment to respectability; but had Nell made marriage a condition of their union, he would have yielded to her wishes, sooner or later. There was something about her grand devotion to Ilfracombe that attracted his worldly nature, that was used to associate with the most mercenary of her sex, and when she blazed out at him in her passionately indignant manner, repudiating, with scorn, the idea of his advances, he admired her still more. He thought Ilfracombe a fool to have given up the one woman for the other; but he would have been the last man to have told him so. He was not going to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. And a very disagreeable feeling had been en-
gendered in him by the knowledge of Nell's supposed fate. He did not want to mention her name, nor to think of her after that. It was a painful reminiscence which he did his best to drown in the distractions of cards and wine. Things were in just this condition when they all journeyed up to Usk together, and Mr. Portland's portmanteau and plaids were carried over to the rooms at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Nell was like a wild creature after she had discovered for certain who their owner was. To meet Mr. Portland, of all men in the world, would seal her fate. Where could she fly, in order to hide herself from him?—what do, to avoid the contact of his presence? She dared not leave the house for fear of meeting him; she was afraid, even, to leave her own room lest he should have taken it into his head to explore the dairy or bake-house. Her mother did not know what had come to her. She grew quite cross at last, and thought it must be the arrival of the grandfolks at the Hall that had made her daughter so flighty and useless and forgetful.

"Just as I want all the help you can give me," she grumbled; "and it's little enough use you are to me at the best of times; you get one of your lardy-dardy, high-flier fits on, and go shivering and shaking about the house, as if you expected to meet a ghost in the passage or the cellar. Now, what made you run away in that flighty fashion, just now, when you were in the middle of doing the lodgers' rooms? I went in, expecting to find them finished, and there were half the things upset and you nowhere."

"I thought I heard one of the gentlemen coming across the grass, and so I left the room till he should be gone again."

"But why, my lass? They won't eat you. They're both as nice-spoken gentlemen as ever I see. And you must have met plenty of gentlefolk up in London town. It isn't as if you were a country-bred girl and too frightened to open your mouth. However, if you don't like to take charge of the rooms, I'll do it myself. But why won't you go out a bit instead? Here's Hugh been over every evening, and you won't stir for him. I hope you're not carrying-on with Hugh, for a bit o' fun, Nell, for he's a good lad as ever stepped, and a minister into the bargain, and it
would be most unbecoming in you. You must go for a walk with him this evening, like a good lass.”

“Not if I don’t feel inclined,” replied Nell, haughtily. “Hugh Owen has no right to look aggrieved if I fancy walking by myself. Men think a deal too much of themselves, in my opinion.”

“Ah, well, my lass, you must have your own way, but I hope you won’t play fast and loose with Hugh Owen, for you’ll never get a husband at this rate. I said, when you first came home, that I’d look higher than him for you, but you’re not the girl you were then. You’ve lost more than a bit of your beauty, Nell, since you had the fever, and it’s ten to one if it will ever come back again. And now that your father is so down about the farm rent being raised, and talks in that pitiful way about leaving the country or going to the workhouse, I think you might go farther and fare worse than Hugh Owen.”

“Very well, mother, I’ll think about it,” the girl would say, more to put an end to the discussion than anything else; and she would wander away from the farm, keeping well to the back of the Hall, and ready to dart off like a hare if she saw any chance of encountering any strangers.

Whilst Nell was leading this hide-and-seek life, the festivities at the Hall were going on bravely. They began, as the old housekeeper had said, as soon as breakfast was concluded, and were kept up till dawn the following morning. A few hours were certainly devoted to eating, drinking and sleeping—and a few more to fishing, riding and driving—but the intervals were filled with cards, smoke and drink, till Nora opened her eyes in astonishment, and wondered if she had got into a club in mistake for a private house. Her hostess appeared quite used to that sort of thing, and entered into it with avidity. She played whist or baccarat as well as any one there, and could sip her brandy and soda and smoke her Turkish cigarette with the keenest enjoyment. She began to think that Lady Ilfracombe was rather slow after a day or two, and, indeed, Nora’s fastness, such as it was, looked quite a tame, uninteresting thing beside that of Lady Bowmant. So she fell, naturally, to the company of the other two ladies who were staying there, and her husband seemed pleased it should be so, and
more than once whispered to her that the whole concern was "a bit too warm" for him, and they would certainly "cut it" at the end of the week. All the same, he played night after night with his hosts and their guests, and seemed to be enjoying himself with the best of them. The other lady visitors, of whom one or two bore rather a shady character (though of this fact Nora was entirely ignorant), were ready to avail themselves of all the luxuries provided for them; but that did not deter them from saying such nasty things about Lady Bowmant behind her back, which struck Lady Ilfracombe as being particularly ill-bred and ungrateful.

"My dear Lady Ilfracombe," said one of them to her, "you know she was positively nobody—a grocer's daughter, I believe, or something equally horrible; and this old fool, Sir Archibald, was smitten by her red cheeks and ringlets, and married her six months after his first wife's death. She is just the sort of person to take an old dotard's fancy. Don't you agree with me?"

"Well, I am not sure that I do, Mrs. Lumley," replied Nora. "I think Lady Bowmant is exceedingly good-natured, and no worse in her manners than many women whom I have met, who could boast of much higher birth. I know nothing of our hostess' ancestry, so I can only speak of her as I find her."

"That is not saying much," exclaimed the other, laughing, "to see her go on with that poor Prince of Huhm-Hes- setal is enough to make one die of laughing. With his broken English, and her attempts at French, it is as good as a play. And the open way in which she flatters him. He will think he is a little god before he leaves Usk."

Their ill-nature made Nora better inclined, than she would otherwise have been, towards the object of it, and she found that Lady Bowmant, though decidedly fast and vulgar, was so kind-hearted and frank, with it all, that she could not help liking her much better than she did her detractors.

"I know I'm an awful Goth," she would observe, confidentially, to Nora; "but I can't speak a word of French, and I want this poor prince, who can hardly speak a word of English, to feel at home with us; so I 'butter' him up,
as well as I know how. You see, Lady Ilfracombe, I wasn't born to the purple. My father was a poor clergymen—ah! you may stare, but it is an accredited fact, that clergymen's children are always the worst—I have three brothers, the greatest scamps you ever knew. They ride like devils, and they swear like jockeys; and if you put them into a drawing-room, they don't know what on earth to do with their arms and legs; but not one of them would tell a lie, or do a dishonorable action, to save his life. No more would I. I am quite aware that I'm not fit to be a baronet's wife, but my old man chose me, and so I do the best I can. And, between you and me, and the post," continued Lady Bowmant, laughing, "I think, considering how I was brought up, that I manage very well. The people down at our place thought I should eat pease with my knife, or something pretty of that sort, the first time I went out to a decent dinner; but I didn't, and here I am, you see, with a real prince for my guest, to say nothing of you and Lord Ilfracombe. O I'm afraid to tell you how much I admire your husband, for fear you should think I want to 'mash' him; but he really is too handsome for anything. I do so love fair men. I told Sir Archibald yesterday, that if the Earl had not been married, I couldn't have resisted a flirtation with him."

"Have one now," cried Nora, merrily; "don't mind me. It is quite the fashion for married men to flirt nowadays, and a lady in town told me once, that she should feel quite hurt if the women did not consider her husband worth pulling caps for."

"Now, you're just the sort of girl I like," said Lady Bowmant, admiringly. "I suppose it isn't good manners to call you a 'girl,' just as if you were nobody; still, you are younger than I am, so you must forgive me. You love horses, too; I can see you're regularly plucky, by the way you handled my little mare yesterday, and I should love to make you as good a whip as myself. I may say that, you know, for my brothers and I rode and drove from little children, and it is the only thing I can do well."

"Except play cards, and smoke cigarettes," put in Nora, slily.

"O you think that all very dreadful, I can hear it from
the tone of your voice," replied her good-humored hostess; "but my old man doesn’t mind it, and he’s the principal person to please, isn’t he? I don’t know what he would do at Usk, dear old chap, if I couldn’t take a hand at whist now and then. I have my horses, you see, but he is getting a bit too puffy for horse exercise, so he would be dreadfully dull without his little game in the evening. O yes, I know what you are going to say, Lady Ilfracombe, and in the mornings, too. Well, I know it is dreadfully dissipated, but it has grown into a sort of habit with us, till we cannot do anything else. But will you come round the village for a spin with me in my tandem? I can show you some beautiful country, as well as some beautiful cobs. Sir Archibald has made it the fashion to deride my tandem, because once a stupid little child ran right under the leader’s feet, and got a few scratches; but you must not believe all he says. Beau and Belle are two little beauties, and I am sure you will not be afraid to sit behind them."

"I am quite sure, also," replied Nora, and she went at once to get herself ready for the drive.

"You mustn’t be surprised to see we are going alone," said Lady Bowmant, as they met again in the Hall. "I never take a groom with me unless I intend calling anywhere. They’re no earthly use, stuck up behind, listening to every word you say, and retailing it in the servants’ hall. Besides, I never knew a man do anything for me, that I wasn’t quite as well able to do for myself. So we’ll have no back seat, if it’s all the same to you."

"Pray don’t alter any of your accustomed rules for my sake," replied the Countess, as they emerged into the open together.

The dappled-cream cobs were a picture, with their hagged manes, and close-docked tails. They were as perfectly matched in appearance, as two horses could possibly be, but their tempers were the very opposite of one another. Beau was a darling, or rather, let us say, he would have been a darling, if Belle would have let him alone to do his business by himself. He occupied the shafts, and stood like a rock, with his forefeet well planted, and his neck curved, and his eyes looking neither to the right hand, nor the left. But Belle, like most of her sex, could not leave a
man in peace, and thought it a bad compliment to herself, if he kept steady. So she tossed her pretty head and neck incessantly, and threw the foam from her bit in her impatience to be off. Lady Bowmant, who was nothing, if she was not a whip, mounted to her seat, and gathered up the ribbons in the most artistic manner, whilst Nora placed herself beside her.

"Let go!" shouted her ladyship, and off they set, Belle curveting down the drive, as though she were dancing, whilst good little Beau threw all his soul into his work, and pulled the dog-cart gallantly along.

"Come, that won't do," cried Lady Bowmant, as she touched up Belle, and made her do her share; "you're not going to leave all the hard work to Beau, Miss, not if I know it. Pull up, like a good girl, and leave off fooling. Aren't they a pair of darlings?" she continued, addressing Nora; "I value them above everything, because they were one of my dear old man's wedding presents to me; but they are distinctly precious in themselves. Here we are at the commencement of Usk, and now you'll see some fun, Lady Ilfracombe. See! how all the people, boys and girls, men and women, fly before me, tumbling over each other to get out of my way. I might be King Herod, coming to massacre the Innocents, by the manner they scuttle out of the road. Whoa! my beauty—there, go gently, gently, Belle. For heaven's sake, don't kick up any of your shines here, or they'll call the policeman. Have you heard that I've twice been stopped, and once fined for furious driving, Lady Ilfracombe?"

"No, indeed, I haven't," replied Nora, who was enjoying the fun immensely. On they flew through the village, and out on the open road, the cobs having now settled seriously to their work, and skimming over the ground like a pair of swallows. When they had driven half the way into Newport, Lady Bowmant turned their heads homewards, and trotted them gently up a long hill. She had them so completely under her control, that it was a pleasure to see her handle the rains, and guide them with a flick of her whip.

"I'd give anything to drive as you do," said Lady Ilfracombe, with genuine admiration of the prowess of her com-
panion. "I should not be afraid whatever happened, whilst you had the reins."

Lady Bowmant looked pleased; but she answered lightly: 
"Dear me! it is nothing; only practice. I bet you could manage them quite as well as I do, if you tried. They are thoroughly well trained, you see, and that's half the battle. And they are thoroughbred into the bargain. You can do twice as much with a well-bred horse as you can with an outsider. Their mouths are like velvet. You could guide them with a bit of string; and, as for their jumping about a little, that's only their fun, you know; there's no vice in it; in fact, there's not a grain of vice between the two of them. I don't know what I should do without the darlings. They are the very joy of my life."

At this juncture they came across a cottage, which seemed to recall something to Lady Bowmant's mind.

"By the way," she exclaimed, suddenly, "I wonder how Phil Farley is, or if the poor old man is still alive? He used to be a protegé of mine last summer, and I often visited him, but I have quite forgotten to ask after him since my return. Would you mind my jumping down for a minute, Lady Ilfracombe? I should like just to inquire how the old man is."

"Of course not," said her companion, cordially.

"You will hold the reins for me? You will not be afraid of them?"

"Not in the least," cried Nora, as she took the ribbons from Lady Bowmant's hands. "Don't hurry yourself on my account. I shall not mind waiting for you at all."

"Thank you so much," replied her hostess, as, after having stroked the necks of her horses and kissed their noses, she disappeared into the cottage.

Nora was rather pleased to be left in sole charge. She had been longing to have a turn at the cobs herself. She had been watching Lady Bowmant's actions very closely, and noticed with what ease she guided the little horses—how quickly they obeyed her voice and the touch of her hand, and had been wishing all the time to try driving them. She had never handled a tandem in her life before; but she was a plucky girl, and her very ignorance made her bold. So, as soon as Lady Bowmant had disappeared under the
low roof of the cottage, she gathered up the reins and gave
the leader a slight flick with her whip. Belle felt the dif-
terence of the hands at once; she was not used to that sort
of thing: the lash of the whip had fallen on her hind
quarters, and she threw out her heels at once, and struck
her stable companion, Beau, full in the face. Beau re-
sented the action; he felt he hadn’t deserved it of Belle, the
best part of whose work he had taken on himself all the
morning; so he swerved a little aside, and then broke into
a smart trot, which the coquettish Belle soon persuaded
him to change into a canter, and, in another moment,
before their driver knew what they were after, the pair
were tearing off in the direction of their stables as fast as
ever they could lay their feet to the ground. Nora tugged
and tugged at the reins without producing the slightest
effect on them. She was very inexperienced, but she could
not help seeing that the cobs were running away and alto-
tgether beyond her control. She grew very pale, but she held
on to the reins like grim death, and just managed to steer
them clear of a donkey cart, which they seemed disposed to
take in their stride. She began, already, to wonder what she
should do when they came to the drive gates of Usk Hall,
which curve sharply round to the left. They would assur-
edly bolt through them, she thought, and upset the dog-
cart, in all probability, against the postern of the gate.
Perhaps they would kill her from the collision and the fall.
The thought that flashed through her mind at that juncture
was, how would Ilfracombe take the news of her death—
what would he do without her?
“ I’m afraid I’m in for it,” she said to herself. “ It’s all
up a tree with me. I’m bound for kingdom come, as sure
as a gun!”

Even at that moment of danger, Nora could be senti-
mental, though she felt the force of the situation, perhaps,
as much as if she had been praying to heaven to avert her
doom. On flew the cobs through the village, though, for-
tunately, without running over anybody, and down a nar-
row lane, on the way to the Hall. There was a sharp curve
about the middle of it. As Nora reached the point, some
one—a woman—suddenly rose from the bank which skirted
the road, and stood full in the way of the flying steeds,
catching with her hand at the reins of Belle as she passed. Nora thought the horses were stopped, but the next moment they started off again; but the woman was not to be seen—she had fallen.

"My God!" thought Nora, "I have killed somebody! They have run over her!"

The arrest, however, slight as it was, had had its effect. Belle and Beau suddenly stood still as rocks, and Nora leapt at once from the cart and approached the stranger, who was just scrambling to her feet.

"O how good, how brave, of you!" she cried. "If you had not done that they might have dashed the cart and me to pieces against the gate. But have you hurt yourself? Are you sure you are all right?"

"I think I am," replied the young woman, as she rose to her feet; "they only knocked me down. The wheels did not come near me."

"Thank God for that!" cried Nora, earnestly. "I should never have forgiven myself if you had been hurt."

She gazed at the face of the country girl in amazement, for she thought it was the most beautiful she had ever seen. And so it was they first met—Nell and Nora.
A Bankrupt Heart

VOL. III
CHAPTER I.

But, as she looked at Nell, Nora saw a stain of blood showing through the sleeve of her light print dress.

"But you are hurt! You are bleeding!" she exclaimed, with horror. "O I am so sorry! What can I do for you?"

Nell regarded the blood-stain with calm indifference.

"It is nothing, my lady (I presume I am speaking to Lady Bowmant)," she added, with a courtesy that struck Nora as uncommon with her class.

"O no, I am not Lady Bowmant. I am only one of her visitors. I was driving with her, and she went into a cottage and left me with the carriage, and these two little brutes ran away with me. But how am I to get them home? I dare not take the reins again, for my life. How far is it to the Hall?"

"O the Hall is only round the corner, madame," answered Nell. "I would help you to lead them, but—" Here she hesitated, not knowing how to proceed; then, as if a sudden thought had struck her, she stood on tiptoe and looked over the hedge and called, loudly: "Tom!"

"Yes, miss," replied a hedger, coming at her call.

"Come round here at once and lead these horses up to the Hall for this lady. They are beyond her control." Then, addressing Nora, she continued: "You had better get in again, madame, and this man will see you safely to the Hall. You will want to send the carriage back for Lady Bowmant."

"O yes, indeed! What will she think of my disappearing in this extraordinary manner? Thank you so much. I don't know what I should have done without your assistance. But I am so troubled about your arm. I am sure you are horribly hurt," said Nora, as she mounted into the dog-cart.

"Please don't say anything more about it," replied Nell; "at the worst it will only be a bruise. You need not be afraid
now, madame. This man is rough, but he understands horses, and is very steady.”

And, so saying, Nell slipped through a break in the hedge and was gone.

Lady Ilfracombe arrived safely at the Hall, and a groom was at once dispatched to pick up Lady Bowmant, whom he met half way between old Farley’s cottage and the house, laughing heartily to herself over the disappearance of her friend and her carriage, having made a shrewd guess that Beau and Belle had taken her home, whether she would or not. The occurrence formed the chief topic of conversation at the luncheon table, and Nora was full of the beautiful country girl she had met and who had shown so much courage in stopping the runaway cobs.

“I must make her some little acknowledgment of the service she rendered me, mustn’t I, Ilfracombe?” she asked her husband. “I might have been killed if it hadn’t been for her, and, or still worse, smashed Lady Bowmant’s pretty trap.”

“Of course, you must, darling,” replied the Earl; “we can never repay her for what she did for us.”

“But I don’t know her name,” exclaimed Nora; “though I suppose she lives somewhere over the way, because she ordered the old hedger to lead the cobs home as if he were her servant. O she is such a pretty young woman! Her face is perfectly lovely! I think it was because I was so occupied gazing at her that I forgot to ask her name.”

“A very pretty girl?” repeated Sir Archibald. “I think that must be one of the Llewellyns. They’re the prettiest girls for a good many miles round Usk. Isn’t that the case, Dolly?” he said, addressing his wife.

“Well, I’ve only seen the married one,” she replied; “but I know they bear that reputation. The father is a very handsome old man.”

At the name of Llewellyn, Lady Ilfracombe looked up quickly, and the Earl and Jack Portland exchanged glances with each other.

“What is there in that to surprise you?” demanded their host, mistaking the meaning of their looks. “Wales is rather celebrated for beauty, you know; at least, we won’t
allow that England, Ireland or Scotland can hold a candle with us in that respect."

Ilfracombe did not seem disposed to answer, so Jack Portland took upon himself to be spokesman.

"I have not the slightest doubt of your superiority, Sir Archibald," he said, "and was not the least surprised to hear you say so. I only thought I had heard the name before."

"What! of Llewellyn? I should be surprised if you had not. We are all Llewellyns, or Owens, or Lewises, or Thomases in Wales. It's one of the commonest names here. I've about half a dozen Llewellyns amongst my tenants. But this man's daughters are really uncommonly handsome. Fine, tall girls, with splendidly cut features. By Jove! it's a pleasure to go to the farm, only to catch a glimpse of one of them."

"And that's why you're always going over there, then," cried Lady Bowmant. "I've caught you at last, my gentleman. No more Panty-cuckoo Farm for you. I'll take good care of that."

"'Panty-cuckoo Farm,' is that where my rustic beauty lives?" exclaimed Nora. "What a fanciful name. What does it mean? Panty-cuckoo?"

"The dell of the cuckoo, or the cuckoo's dell," replied Lady Bowmant. "Yes, isn't it pretty? It's the farm just across the road, where Mr. Portland and Mr. Lennox sleep. Mrs. Llewellyn is a dear old woman. I always go to her in any perplexity. She supplies us with all the extra eggs and chickens and butter we may want. Lady Ilfracombe! you should see her dairy. It's a perfect picture; and everything about the farm is so quaint and old, and so faultlessly clean and neat. She and her husband are quite model tenants. I always take my friends to pay them a visit."

After luncheon, when the rest of the party had separated to pursue their own devices, Nora crept after her husband.

"Ilfracombe," she whispered, "supposing this should be one of her sisters?"

"Whose! What are you talking about?" he said, rather curtly.

"You know. The Miss Llewellyn you have told me of."

"What will you get into your head next? What likeli-
hood is there of such a thing? Who ever said she had any sisters, or came from Usk? Didn’t you hear Sir Archibald say the place was peopled with Llewellyns? Please don’t get any absurd fancies into your head. The name is distasteful to me as it is. I wish we had not heard it. Now, I suppose there will be a grand fuss made of the service this girl rendered you, and the whole family will be paraded out for our especial benefit. You have been a good friend to me in this business, Nora. Get me out of this unnecessary annoyance, if you can.”

“Oh course, I will,” replied his wife, readily. “You shan’t be bothered if I can help it, Ilfracombe. You were a dear, good boy, to make a clean breast to me of the matter, and I’ll see you don’t suffer for it. I must remunerate the young woman, or her parents, for what she did this morning; so I’ll just go to the farm this afternoon by myself, and get it quietly over. How much should I offer her? What do you think? Will five pounds be enough?”

“I think so; but that is as you feel about it. But, Nora darling, you needn’t mention our names, need you? We shall be gone, probably, before they have a chance of finding out anything about us; and, though I don’t suppose there is any chance of their being related to—to—her, yet, if they should be—you understand?”

Lady Ilfracombe went up to her husband, and kissed his anxious face.

“I understand,” she replied, and then left the room.

There was a slight summer shower that afternoon, and the rest of the Hall party had already settled themselves to spend it indoors. A noisy set were occupied in the billiard room, chattering and laughing over their game, and the more respectable scandal-mongers were working, reading, and taking away their neighbor’s characters in the seclusion of the drawing-room. Lady Ilfracombe donned a large straw hat, and, taking an umbrella in her hand, set forth for Panty-cuckoo Farm, without observation. She soon found her way through the white gate and down the hilly slope, and found the latched wicket that guarded the bricked pathway up to the house. As soon as she placed her hand upon the latch, Mrs. Llewellyn, as was her custom at the approach of any visitors, came quickly forward, to
save her the trouble of opening it, and give her a welcome to Panty-cuckoo Farm.

"Walk in, my lady," she exclaimed, cordially. "This way, if you please."

And ushering Nora into the parlor, she dusted a chair with her apron, and set it before her.

"O what a lovely room!" cried Nora, enthusiastically, as she gazed around her. "What dear old carved oak—why, it must be centuries old; and what beautiful china. Don't leave me alone here, pray, or I shall steal half your things. I suppose you are Mrs. Llewellyn. Well, you have the very jolliest room I ever saw in my life."

Mrs. Llewellyn was completely won over by this praise. She was very proud, as has been said before, of her room and oak and china, and nothing pleased her better than to see them appreciated.

"Many have told me so before, ma'am, but I am glad you like them. My husband and I have been offered pounds and pounds, sometimes, for these very things by the ladies and gentlemen who have visited Usk, but we could never make up our minds to sell them. They belonged to our great-great-grandparents, and there they will be till our time comes to leave them behind us for the benefit of our daughters."

"Your daughters, Mrs. Llewellyn? That reminds me of the purpose of my visit to you. A young woman, whom I believe to be one of your daughters, did me a very great service this morning. She stopped a pair of runaway horses for me and saved, perhaps, my life."

"Aye, that was my eldest girl. She told us of it; but 'tis nothing to make a fuss about, ma'am. Country girls are more used to do such things than town ladies. There's not a girl in Usk but what would do her best to stop a horse. I hope you weren't hurt at all yourself, ma'am?"

"Not a bit; but your daughter was. I saw the blood-stain on the sleeve of her dress. I'm afraid the horse touched her arm with his hoof when he threw her down."

"It can't be overmuch," said Mrs. Llewellyn, quietly, "for she never said anything to me about it; though, now you mention it, ma'am, I did notice a bit o' blood on her sleeve, too. Lor! it's nothing. I thought she's got it in
the hen-house, maybe, or the larder. It isn’t worth speaking of.”

“But I am quite of a different opinion, I can assure you, Mrs. Llewellyn, and I came over expressly to tell you so. May I see your daughter? Is she in the house?”

“Certainly, ma’am, if you wish it. I’ll send her to you at once; and perhaps you would do us the honor to take a cup of tea whilst you wait. Lady Bowmant, she always has a cup of tea when she comes here. She says she has quite a fancy for our cream.”

“I will, with pleasure, Mrs. Llewellyn; indeed, I have heard such grand accounts of your famous dairy, that I am quite anxious to taste its produce.”

The farmer’s wife bridled under the compliment, and turned, with the intention of leaving the room. But, as she reached the door, she said:

“May I take the liberty of asking your name, madame?”

Nora was just about to give her maiden name, remembering her husband’s injunction, when she noticed she had withdrawn the glove of her left hand, displaying her wedding-ring and jeweled keepers. So, with her quick wit, which never found her at a disadvantage, she borrowed the name of one of the ladies who were even at that moment taking away hers in the Hall drawing-room, and answered:

“Mrs. Lumley.”

“Thank you, madame,” said the old woman, as she curtseyed and withdrew.

In another moment she was adjuring Nell to go down to the parlor and hear what the lady from the Hall had to say to her.

“O mother, why did you say I was indoors?” she exclaimed, fretfully. “What should she want to see me for? You know how I hate seeing strangers.”

“Well, my lass, it is not my fault. The lady—Mrs. Lumley is her name—wants to thank you for what you did this morning; and, for my part, I think it is very pretty-mannered of her to come over herself, when she might have written to express her gratitude. But here she is, and you must go down and see her whilst I make her a cup o’ tea. She says she’s heard so much of our dairy, that she’s quite anxious to taste our cream. She’s as nice-spoken a young
lady as ever I met, and I'm sure she has good intentions towards you."

"But I don't want to be thanked," repeated Nell, in the same tone; "it was the simplest thing in the world; any one would have done it. I only caught at the reins as the horses passed me—what does she want to make a fuss about it for? It's over and done with. Why can't she leave it alone?"

"Well, my lass, I can't stay to answer all your testy questions. I must go and see that the kettle boils for the tea. Now, go down, there's a good girl. She's one of the Hall guests, and we mustn't offend them, you know."

So Nell smoothed her rippling hair, and went down to the parlor with a bad grace, and stood just inside the door, stiff as a soldier on duty, and without speaking a word. But Nora did not seem to perceive her mood. She thought her stiffness was meant for respect.

"O Miss Llewellyn," she began, "I've come over expressly to see you, and thank you better than I could this morning, for the great service you rendered me. Don't stand there, pray; but come here and sit down by me, and let me tell you how brave and courageous and good I think you were to do so much for a stranger."

Nell's haughty shyness was overcome by the cordiality of her new acquaintance. She sat down, as she was asked to do, but not a feature of her beautiful face relaxed. She could not forget that she was speaking to a visitor from the Hall—that place which she had so much dreaded since she knew that Mr. Portland was staying there.

"I can't see the particular courage of it, Mrs. Lumley," she replied. "I was sauntering along inside the hedge, looking for some of my mother's turkey pouls that had strayed from the yard, when your horses came tearing along, and I put out my hand, mechanically, to stop them. You are making too much of my action—indeed you are. Tom was only a few yards further on, clipping the hedges. He would have stopped them, and better than I did, and not been rolled so ignominiously in the dust."

And Nell could not help smiling at the recollection.

"Ah! and you were kicked, or something," exclaimed Nora. "I saw the blood on your arm. And yet you will say it was of no consequence."
Nell rolled up the sleeve of her print dress, exposing her white, smooth arm. There was a long graze on it, and it was beginning to get discolored.

“That is all,” she said, contemptuously. “You don’t call that anything.”

“But indeed I do,” said Nora; “and it was ever so good of you to incur it for my sake. Besides, you don’t consider the risk you ran. Because you happened to get off with a few bruises, it doesn’t follow that it was not quite as brave of you to risk getting your leg broken or your head run over. And there is no saying what you did not save me from. No, no, Miss Llewellyn, you shall not put me off that way. You must let me offer you some little re-

muneration for your timely help. Don’t imagine I think that any money can repay you for it, but perhaps you will buy yourself some little present to remind you of this day, and how grateful I am to you.”

And Nora placed the five-pound note gently in Nell’s hand as she spoke. Nell never opened it. It might have been for fifty pounds for aught she knew; but she took it up, folded as it was, and replaced it on her companion’s lap.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Lumley,” she said, quietly. “You mean it kindly, I know, and I appreciate your intention; but I cannot take money from you for so slight a thing. My father would not like it—we are not in need of it—and I shall remember you and to-day quite well, without it.”

Nora felt hurt and annoyed; not with Nell, but herself. She ought to have known better than to offer such a very superior sort of young woman, money. It was thoughtless of her—unpardonable. She thrust the offending bank note into her pocket, and turning, took Nell’s hand.

“Forgive me,” she said, just as if she had known her for years. “I have been a fool. I ought to have seen that you were above such paltry considerations. You don’t look like a farmer’s daughter to me. You look as if you had been used to so much better things. Have you lived in Usk all your life?”

“No, not all my life,” said Nell.

“Have you been a governess, then, or anything of that sort? You seem to have had such a very superior educa-

tion,” remarked Nora.
“Do you think so?” replied Nell. She certainly seemed a very difficult sort of young woman to get on with. Nora hardly knew how to proceed. But then a sudden thought struck her (for hers was a generous nature), and hastily drawing a sapphire ring from her finger, she tried to put it on one of Nell's. It was one that the Earl had given her—he had been accustomed to wear himself. It was what is called a gipsy ring—a broad band of gold, in which three unusually fine, dark-blue, flawless sapphires were sunk—the only ring which Ilfracombe had worn before his marriage. He had put it on Nora's finger, at Malta, as soon as he was engaged to her, as proxy for one better suited to her slender finger, and she had refused to give it up again. Now it struck her that it would be just the sort of ring to present to a young woman whose hands were large, and used to rough work. So she tried to put it on the third finger of Nell's left hand.

“They say it is unlucky to wear a ring on your wedding finger till you are married,” she said, laughing; “but, I am sure, Miss Llewellyn, you are far too sensible a girl to mind an old superstition.”

“But what are you doing?” asked Nell, sharply, as she drew her hand away.

There, on her finger, glittered the ring she knew so well—had seen so often on the hand of her lover in the olden days. She gazed at it for a moment, fascinated as a bird by the eye of a snake—and then, with a sharp cry, she dragged the jewel off again, and it rolled under the table and along the polished oak floor.

“Oh my poor ring!” cried the Countess, somewhat offended at this determined repulse.

“Whose is it? Where did you get it?” exclaimed Nell, as she rose to her feet, with flashing eyes and trembling limbs.

“Where did I get it?” echoed Nora, with amazement.

“Why, I bought it, of course. Where should I have got it?”

“No, you didn't!” said Nell, panting; “it was given to you.”

“What an extraordinary girl you are!” replied Nora, as she stooped to recover her ring. “If it were given to me,
you may be sure I have every right to pass it on to you if I choose. But what makes you say so?"

"Who gave it to you?" asked Nell, without apologizing for her strange behavior.

"My husband," replied Nora, without thinking.

"Your husband! Mr. Lumley! And from whom did he get it, then?" persisted the farmer's daughter.

"Really, I don't see what right you have to question me after this fashion," said Nora. "I don't know who he got it from. The jewelers', I suppose. But, pray, don't let us say another word upon the subject. It is evident that, instead of giving you pleasure, I have done just the other thing. All my stupidity, I suppose. I thought, as you would not take money, that the ring would have been more acceptable to you, but I was mistaken. Now, pray, don't be angry. Let us drop the subject altogether. Ah, here comes your mother with the tea-tray. Mrs. Llewellyn, your daughter and I have been having quite a little quarrel over this affair. She won't take money from me, and she won't take a present, so I don't know what to do. Perhaps you will be able to make her a little more reasonable after I have gone."

"Ah, ma'am, she's very queer at times, poor lass!" said Mrs. Llewellyn; for Nell had taken the occasion of her entrance to escape to the upper story again; "she's been so pulled-down and weakened by the fever, that father and I say we hardly know her. Sometimes I think she'll never be the same girl again as she was before she left home. But you mustn't think nothing more about giving her a present, ma'am. What she did for you, you was most heartily welcome to, as her father would say, too, if he was here. Sir Archibald has been a good landlord to us for many years past; and if he hadn't taken it into his head to raise the rent, we shouldn't have anything to say against him. But, pray, let me give you a cup o' tea, ma'am, with cream and sugar to your liking."

And over the discussion of Mrs. Llewellyn's excellent tea, Nell and her abrupt behavior were spoken of no more. But Lady Ilfracombe, though she did not like to vex the Earl by mentioning the subject to him, could not banish it from her mind for some time afterwards.
Whilst Nora was walking, thoughtfully, back to the Hall, Nell was raging up and down the circumscribed limits of her bedroom, with her heart and brain in a tumult of suspicion and suspense. "The ring! the ring!" was all she could say to herself. It was the Earl's ring—she was sure of that—she had always seen it on his finger—had so often drawn it off playfully and placed it on her own. She recognized the very color of the sapphires; they were so darkly blue and yet clear as a summer sea; she remembered Lord Ilfracombe having told her the gems were flawless and had been presented in another form by an Eastern potentate to some ancestor of his, who had been Governor-General of India. She would have sworn to them amongst a thousand. How, then, had this woman, this Mrs. Lumley, got hold of them? Was she a friend of Ilfracombe's and had he given them to her? Nell thought it unlikely. The Earl had never been a cavalier des dames; besides, he was married now, and his family heirlooms belonged to his wife. At that, her thought flew to Mr. Portland. He was at the bottom of the mystery, perhaps. He had obtained the jewel from Lord Ilfracombe, either by an appeal to the latter's generosity, or by his odious habit of gambling—laid a bet with the Earl about it, or won it as a stake. And, then, he must have given it to this lady—this Mrs. Lumley. What was she to him, then? Was their combined presence at the Hall by accident or design? Nell thirsted to learn the truth of it. She felt it a desecration to have seen his ring on the hand of another person, and to have had it offered to herself in that careless fashion, as if it were of no intrinsic value. The ring that she had known for so long—that had been clasped in her hand by day—that she had lain with her head on by night! Poor Nell sobbed aloud in the agony of remembrance, as she recalled the fact that she had no further part nor lot in it. It was something more than mere suspicion that was worrying her. We
have a sixth sense called intuition, which, as a rule, we pay too little attention to. The influences to which we have been subject—the experiences we have passed through, all leave a subtle something behind them, which is patent to the intuition of our acquaintances as theirs is to us. We may not recognize it, but it guides, in a great measure, our feelings and ideas, our likes and dislikes. It was intuition that drew Lady Ilfracombe to Panty-cuckoo Farm and made her conceive such an unusual interest in Nell Llewellyn. It was intuition that made Nell shrink from the friendly advances of the woman who had supplanted her in the affections of her lover, and burn to discover the reason that she was in possession of his ring. It was fate—the fate that, laugh at it or despise it as we will, still goes on silently but surely, weaving the web of all our destinies—that had drawn these actors in the tragedy of life together to one meeting-place, to fulfill the appointed end of the drama which they had written for themselves. The Countess Ilfracombe went back to Usk Hall, rather depressed than otherwise, for it is not pleasant to have an intended kindness thrown back in your face; and intuition told her that there was something more beneath the surface of Nell’s manner than she chose to let her know—and Nell Llewellyn was vexed with herself as well as the stranger, because intuition told her that Nora was not at fault, however the circumstances of her life might have become entangled with her own. She wished now that she had not been so hasty—that she had asked a few questions about the ring and where it came from. By that means she might have gained what she so longed for—news of Lord Ilfracombe, without betraying her own identity. Now that the opportunity was past, Nell blamed herself, and wished it might come over again. Was it possible that she could bring about another interview with the lady?—induce her once more to speak of her gratitude for the service rendered her?—and so bring the conversation round without direct inquiry to her refusal of the sapphire ring? Her next thought was, how should she gain speech of Mrs. Lumley without encountering Jack Portland? Nell thought it would be pretty safe to visit the Hall in the evening. The beautiful warm nights they were having then, were very
likely to tempt the ladies of the party to walk about the
grounds after dinner, whilst she knew, from experience,
that that was the very time the gentlemen would com-
mence to play billiards, or baccarat. If she went that way
about eight o'clock that evening, she might have a chance
of encountering Mrs. Lumley—at all events, some force, of
which Nell knew not the name, drew her that way; and, as
soon as their early supper was over, she threw a light
shawl over her head, and stole out, as she told her mother,
"for a breath of fresh air." The Hall stood on an emi-
nence, crowned with wood. To the back of it was a copse
of fir trees, which formed an admirable shelter from the
north wind, and extended down either side for some dis-
tance. It was under cover of this plantation, that Nell
approached the house. It was not so thick but that she
could see from it if any one was walking in the open
grounds that surrounded the Hall, and it was on this plan-
tation, naturally, that the back premises, through which
she gained access to Mrs. Hody's apartments, looked. The
way to it, unless one used the drive, was through some
large meadows belonging to the estate, and Nell had tra-
versed the whole length of these, and gained the back of
the plantation, when she was startled by seeing the figure
of a man approaching her. Her first impulse was to turn
and fly, forgetting, in her simplicity, that it was the very
mode to attract attention. She had turned her back upon
the stranger, and was walking rapidly the other way, when
she heard him say:

"Don't let me frighten you away. You are quite wel-
come to walk here."

It was the voice of Lord Ilfracombe.

She would have known it amidst the assembled multi-
tudes of earth, and the sound of it made her forget every-
thing but himself. She forgot that he must suppose her to
be dead. She forgot that he had voluntarily given her up
—that he was a married man—all things, but that he was
there—and she loved him. At the sound of her lover's
voice, as potent as the trump at the last day to rouse her
slumbering soul, Nell turned sharply round, and cried, in a
tone of ecstasy:

"Vernie! O my Vernie!" and flew towards him.
She was the only person in the world who had ever called him by that name. Lord Ilfracombe's father had died before he could remember, and ever since his babyhood, he had been addressed, as is usual, by his title only. Even his doting mother, and proud sisters had called him nothing else. To everybody, he had been Ilfracombe, and Ilfracombe alone. But when he became intimate with Nell, and took her about occasionally with him, to Paris, or Rome, it became necessary to use a little discretion, and he entered their names on the travelers' books and passports as Mr. and Mrs. Vernon, which was his Christian name. So she had come to call him "Vernie" as a pet name, and he had let her do it, because it was just as well she should not be shouting "Ilfracombe" after him wherever they went. But the circumstance had identified her with the name, and when she cried "Vernie! O my Vernie!" in response to his words, Lord Ilfracombe stood still—petrified, as though he had encountered a voice from heaven.

"Who is it? What do you want?" he answered, trembling.

But Nell left him in no doubt. She came flying to his breast, and threw her arms round him and pressed her warm mouth on his, and displayed all the passion she had been wont to do, when he returned to her after an absence from home.

"Vernie, my darling—my own darling!" she reiterated, gasping for breath. "O I did not know you were here—I did not know you were here! My God! I shall die with joy!"

"Nell!" he uttered, in an awed tone—"Nell, is this really you?"

"Yes, yes! it is I. Who else should it be? Who has ever loved you as your poor Nell?" and she embraced him anew.

"But," said the Earl, incredulously, "who was drowned, then? They told me you were drowned, Nell. How has this mistake arisen, or have I been deceived by design?"

"O Vernie! I did drown myself; that is, I tried to—I wanted to—I felt I could not live, my darling, without you or your love! What was there for me to live for, Vernie, when you were gone?"
All the Earl's remorse—all the hard things he had thought of himself, and all the kind thoughts he had had of her since he had learnt how they parted, rushed back upon his mind now, and he, too, forgot everything, except that his conscience had been relieved from an intolerable burden and that the woman he held in his arms had loved him faithfully for many years.

He laid his mouth upon hers and kissed her as warmly in return as ever he had done in the days gone by.

"Thank God, it is not true!" he exclaimed. "O my poor Nell! I have suffered hell in thinking you had died by your own hand for my sake."

"I, too, have been in hell!" she whispered. "O Vernie, why did you leave me? I loved you so!"

"I was a brute!" replied the Earl; "an ungrateful, selfish brute; but I will make you amends for it, if I die!"

What amends could he make her, except by giving her back the love he had seemed to withdraw? Nell thought of no other; she would have accepted no other. She held her heaven in her arms now—and all the troubles of life had faded away.

"Your love! your love! I only want your love, Vernie!" she whispered.

"You have it, darling! You have always had it!" replied Ilfracombe, as he gazed at the lovely face upturned to his in the moonlight. "But how thin and pale you are, Nell! You are not like the same girl. What has happened, dear, to change you so?"

"I have been ill, Vernie," answered Nell; "I have had a bad fever and my trouble has done the rest. I have had no peace—no hope without you. I have been unable to eat or sleep. How could I, knowing you had given me up? O Vernie, why didn't you kill me first? It would have been so much kinder."

Lord Ilfracombe groaned.

"God forgive me! I never saw what I had done before this night. Nell, will you ever forgive me or forget my base ingratitude to you, who were always so good to me? How can you say you love me? A man like myself is unworthy of any woman's love. You ought, by rights, to loathe and execrate my very name."
"But I don't—I don't! I love you still with all my heart and soul! O Vernie, I was so wretched, so miserable, when I came out to walk to-night, and now I am as happy as the day is long. You love me still. That is all I want to know."

"But that won't rectify the great wrong I have done you, Nell. That won't replace you in the position my selfishness hurled you from. You forget—perhaps you don't know—that I am—married!"

Nell drew herself a little away from him.

"O yes, I know it," she said, in a low voice; "but if you love me, Vernie, I have the best part of you still."

Lord Ilfracombe did not know what to answer. The great emotion—the surprise, almost the shock, of finding that Nell still lived, was over now, in a great measure, and he had time to remember his wife and how much he loved her (as he had never, even in the flush of his first passion, loved the poor girl before him), and what she would think if she could see and hear him now. The disloyalty of which he was guilty struck him like a cold chill. Was he fated never to be true to any one woman? He relaxed the tight hold he had maintained on Nell, and putting her a little away from him, said, gently:

"I do love you, my dear; I shall always love you and remember the time we spent together; but my marriage, you see, will prevent my showing it as I used to do."

"O yes, of course."

"Lady Ilfracombe is very good to me and deserves all the respect and esteem that I can show her" (he dared not speak of his love for Nora to the poor wreck who stood so patiently hanging on his words); "and when she heard that you were drowned, Nell, she was almost as sorry as myself—"

"Never mind that," interposed Nell; "I don't want to hear about it."

"—but, of course, the past must be past now. It cannot come over again. But you must let me provide for your future, Nell. I will not have—it is impossible that you, who have been so near to me, should either work for your living or live without the comforts to which you have been accustomed. It was very naughty of you to refuse
the settlement I wished to make upon you—more, it was unkind to me and when I heard what you had said and done, I was very unhappy."

"It was no use, Vernie; I could not take it," said Nell.

"But you will accept it now, darling, won't you, if only to prove you have forgiven me all the wrong I have done you, and to make me happy, too—to wipe out the bitter remorse I have felt—eh, Nell?"

She shook her head.

"I couldn't. Don't ask me, Vernie; my people know nothing of all this—of what you and I were to one another. They think I was just in service of your house and nothing more. You wouldn't shame me before them, would you? How could I account for your giving me an allowance? They would guess the truth at once. Besides, I don't want it. I have everything that I can desire, except your love. And now I have seen you and know you love me still, I am quite happy, and want nothing more. O God bless you for your kindness to me. Say it once more, my own darling! Say you love me best of all the world, and the other woman may have your title and your money."

He could not say what she asked him to do, but he bent down his head again and murmured in her ear:

"I have told you so a dozen times. Do you suppose that a few months can make such a difference to a man as that? I could wish things had been otherwise for us, my poor Nell! I wish I had had the courage to marry you, years ago. I should have been a happier man than I am ever likely to be now, with the remembrance of your disappointment haunting me like an evil spirit."

"No, no! it must not haunt you. It is gone!" she exclaimed, with womanly unselfishness; "I shall never fret again, now I have seen you once more and heard you speak! Kiss me, my Vernie—again—again! Ah, that is sweet! How many, many weary months it is—more than a year—since I have felt your dear lips on my own! It is like a draught of new wine! It has made a strong woman of me!"

"And where are you going now, Nell?" he asked, as she disengaged herself from his clasp.

"To my home—back to Panty-cuckoo Farm," she replied,
"Ah, it is you, then, who live at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Did you not stop Lady Bowmant's cobs as they were running away this morning?"

"What! they have told you, too? What an absurd fuss they make of nothing! The lady, Mrs. Lumley, was at the farm this afternoon, worrying me about it."

"Mrs. Lumley!" he ejaculated, in surprise; for, though Nora had not informed him of her visit, he knew the real Mrs. Lumley had not been there. "What was she like?"

"A slight, willowy-looking young woman, with quick, brown eyes and pointed features. She was very kind, but she teased me so about taking a reward for doing nothing at all. Why, I didn't even stop them. They stopped of themselves. All I did was to get myself rolled over in the dust. By the way," continued Nell, as a sudden thought struck her, "are you very intimate with Mrs. Lumley, Vernie?"

"By no means. Why do you ask?"

"Because, when I told her I couldn't accept money at her hands, she took a ring off her finger and tried to put it on mine. And it was your ring—the gipsy ring set with sapphires—I recognized it directly, and I thought I should have gone mad, with puzzling my brain where she got it and if you had given it to her. Did you?"

"Given my sapphire ring to Mrs. Lumley? Most certainly not," replied the Earl, who guessed at once that his sharp-witted little wife, in order to obey his injunction not to disclose her real name, had borrowed the other woman's. "By Jove! that was cool of her. I remember now she was fooling with my ring last night and put it on her own finger for a piece of fun. But to offer it to you! Well, I wish you had taken it. She would have looked very foolish when I asked where it was gone, wouldn't she?"

"O Vernie, I couldn't have touched it! It would have burned me. The dear ring I had so often played with myself. I have been crying all the afternoon for thinking of it."

"Silly girl! I must get you one as like it as I can. But, now, I am afraid I must return to the house, or some of the fellows may come to look after me."

"Ah," said Nell, with a shudder, "you have that horrid
Mr. Portland there. Vernie, you will not tell him you have met me, will you?"

"Certainly not. It is the last thing I should do. But I cannot understand why all you women should seem to take a dislike to dear old Jack. He is the best fellow I know."

"Vernie, he was never your friend," said Nell, earnestly. "You wouldn't believe it in the old days. Try to believe it now."

"No, Nell, I cannot, not till I have some better proofs than another's word. Lady Ilfracombe is always dinning the same thing into my ears, but without effect. Jack has always been true to me, so far as I know, and I speak of a man as I find him."

"Vernie," said Nell, after a pause, "is she fond of you?"

He knew she alluded to his wife, and answered:

"I think so. I hope so. If people have to pass their lives together, it is best they should be good friends, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied the girl, as she slowly moved away.

He was just going to call out "Good-night" to her, when she came back rapidly.

"O Vernie, she doesn't love you as I did! Tell me that she doesn't!"

"No, dear, no!" he answered, gravely, "I don't think she does."

"And you don't love her as you did me?" she persisted; and again Lord Ilfracombe was able to answer with truth, "No!"

She threw her arms passionately round him and inquired:

"When shall we meet again? Where can I see you, Vernie? The minutes will seem like hours till then."

"Nellie," he said, seriously, "you know it is impossible that we can meet like this in any safety. I am overjoyed—more overjoyed than I can tell you to find you are living, whom I have mourned as dead; but I am here only for a few days, and my time is not my own. Were I to say that I would meet you here to-morrow evening, I might be prevented, and you would think me unkind. But you will know that I am thinking of you all the same, and if
we meet, it will be an unexpected pleasure for us both, eh?"

He spoke kindly, but Nell, with the unerring instinct which love gives to women, read between the lines, and saw that, whatever he might say, Lord Ilfracombe would rather not meet her again in Usk.

"Yes, you are right," she answered, slowly. "But, O it is so hard to see you once and, perhaps, not again for ages—like a drop of water to a man who is dying of thirst! O Vernie, I must go! This has been heaven to me, but so much too short. Good-bye! God bless you! I will pray every moment that we may meet again."

She heaved a deep sigh as she pronounced her farewell, and flitted down the grassy slope in the gleaming, on her way to the farm again. And some one saw her—Hugh Owen, who had been lingering about the road, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Nell, had watched more than half her interview with Lord Ilfracombe. He could not distinguish their words; he was too far off, but he had seen the two figures engaged in earnest conversation—he had seen them approach each other, and guessed the close embrace that followed—and he had seen their parting, and that Lord Ilfracombe watched the tall, graceful shape of his companion till she was out of sight—until, in fact, Nell had entered Panty-cuckoo Farm, and left the young minister in no doubt of her identity.

And what were Ilfracombe's feelings as he strolled back to Usk Hall? Not entirely pleasurable ones, we may be sure. He could not but be thankful that his worst fears for Nell Llewellyn were allayed—that his conscience was no longer burdened with the thought that his desertion had been the means of her death—but, as he became used to this relief, the old sensations regarding her returned, and he could not help acknowledging to himself, that her love wearied him—that Nora's sharpness of temper, and stand-offishness were as sauce piquante after Nell's adoration—and that, though he rejoiced to see her alive, he was very sorry they should have met, in such close proximity to the house which held his wife. He had had one or two doubts lately, as to whether another week of Usk Hall would not suit him very well—now, he had none. The sooner they
were out of it, the better, and he should speak to Nora to-
night about joining his mother's party at Wiesbaden. She
and Nell must not meet again. He should not reveal the
identity of the latter to Lady Ilfracombe, but all inter-
course must be stopped between them. He was sorry for
poor Nell—very, very sorry; but, hang it all! Nora was his
wife, and the prospective mother of his children; and, at
all hazards, he would keep her, for the future, out of the
other woman's way.

This is the difference men make between their mistresses
and their wives. The one may be the infinitely better
woman of the two; but the law does not overshadow her,
so she must stand, like Hagar, apart in the wilderness
which she has created for herself.
CHAPTER III.

When Lord Ilfracombe walked into the lighted drawing-room of Usk Hall, he looked so pale and thoughtful, that the ladies began to rally him at once, on his supposed melancholy. Dear me! what could it be? Who could he have met, during his evening ramble, to make him look so grave? Had she failed to keep her appointment, or had she been unkind? The whole list of little pleasantries with which the fair sex assail men on such occasions, with the idea of being arch and witty, was recounted for his lordship's benefit; but he looked very disinclined to supply food for their banter. His worry was so pre-evident, that his wife asked him if he had a headache.

"A little. Nothing to speak of," he answered, quietly.

"Come along, old man, and have a game at pool," said Jack Portland, in his turn; "that will soon chase the vapors away. I expect it's Sir Archibald's port that's done the job. It's the most alluring wine I've tasted for many a day."

"No, no, I won't allow it. Nothing of the kind," cried the jolly baronet. "There isn't a headache in a dozen of it. Lord Ilfracombe hasn't had enough of it. That's what's the matter with him."

"I think the sun may have touched me," said Ilfracombe, feebly. "It has been very hot to-day."

"The sun; nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Portland. "I never heard you give that excuse before, though we've been in several hot countries together. Come along to the billiard-room. You shouldn't go wandering away by yourself in this fashion, and thinking over your sins. It's enough to give any man the blues. I couldn't stand it myself. You'll forget it before the first game's over."

"No, thanks, Jack; not to-night. I don't feel fit to compete with your excellent play. I'll sit here instead, and listen to Nora's singing."

And he threw himself on a sofa by his wife's side, as he spoke.
"Ulysses at the feet of Penelope," sneered Mr. Portland. "Well, Ilfracombe, long as I've known you, I never saw you turned into a carpet knight, before."

"Only for this evening," said the Earl, lazily, as he settled himself comfortably on the sofa. Jack Portland appeared quite aggrieved by his defalcation.

"Well, come along, Sir Archibald, and Lumley, and the rest of you fellows. Don't let us waste our time looking at his lordship doing the lardidardi. He owes me my revenge for the fiver he made me disgorge last night; but I suppose it's no use trying to get it out of him now."

And with a rude laugh, he left the room. Ilfracombe leant back against the shoulder of his wife, and said:

"Sing something, darling, won't you? Something low and sweet, like 'Come to me.' My head is really painful, and I want soothing to-night."

"I will sing anything you like," replied Nora, as she rose and went to the piano. Her voice was not powerful, but she had received a first-rate musical education in Malta, and was an accomplished drawing-room singer. She ran through about half a dozen songs, one after the other, accompanying herself with a delicacy of touch and artistic expression, which was more than half the battle. Ilfracombe listened to her with a dreamy pleasure, but all the time he was cogitating which would be the best plea on which to induce Nora to leave Usk Hall. He was determined not to run the risk of her meeting Nell Llewellyn again; but she was rather a willful little lady, and wanted to know the why and the wherefore of everything. She had asked him not to go to Wales, and he had insisted on doing so—she had begged they should not exceed the week for which they had accepted the invitation, and he had told her, but the day before, that he wished to remain as long as Jack did. Now, he had to invent some excuse for leaving directly—what should it be? He was not a bright man. Had he been so, he would have known, by this time that, with Nora, honesty was decidedly the best policy, because she was not easily deceived, and had he told her the truth, she would have been the first to wish to go. But he had a poor idea of women. He fancied that if his wife heard of the proximity of his former mistress, there would
be a "row"—that Nora would not be able to resist flaunting her triumph in the other woman's face; nor Nell, of telling his wife how far he had forgotten his duty to her, in the pleasure and relief of finding that she (Nell) lived. Ilfracombe was a chivalrous gentleman, but it was not in his nature to love, as either of these two women (whom he so much distrusted) loved him. But he managed to lay down a plan of action, as he lounged on the sofa, listening to his wife's singing, and, as soon as they were alone, he opened fire.

"Nora," he said, abruptly, "I've made up my mind to leave the Hall. How soon can you be ready?"

As he had anticipated, Lady Ilfracombe required to know the reasons which had induced him to alter his plans.

"Do you mean to go at once?" she questioned. "Why, it was only yesterday that you promised Lady Bowmant to stay until Mr. Portland left. Has he altered his plans also, or do you intend to leave without him?"

"What difference can that make to you?" he said, fretfully. "I have always thought that you rather disliked Jack, than otherwise."

"My likes, or dislikes, have nothing to do with the matter, Ilfracombe, or we should not be here at all," she answered. "All I want to know is, why we are going so suddenly, and what I am to say to our hostess?"

"Say? why, anything. Surely, you are clever enough to invent an excuse without my assistance. Pretend to have received a letter from my mother, who desires us to join her without delay; or, get a relation to die for the express purpose. Nothing can be easier to a clever girl like you."

"O I can tell as many lies as you wish, Ilfracombe; and, as for going, I shall only be too delighted to get away. Only it is not treating me fairly to keep me so completely in the dark. Something must have happened to make you so anxious to be off. Now do tell me," she continued, as she seated herself upon his knee; "you know I'm as safe as a church. Have you a row on, with Portland or any of the others? Or are Lady Bowmant's attentions becoming altogether too warm? I gave her free leave to make love to you, so you mustn't judge her too hardly."

"No, my dear, don't be ridiculous; it's nothing of that
sort. But—well, to make a clean breast of it, Nora, the play is awfully hot here; enough to break the Bank of England, and I think it's gone on quite long enough. Why, I should be almost afraid to tell you how much money I have lost since coming here. We have an ample fortune; but, as you have often told me, no fortune will bear such a continual strain on it for long. And it's impossible to refuse playing with one's host. So I have decided, that the sooner we are out of it, the better."

"You are right," said his wife, thoughtfully. "I was afraid of this all along. It sounds dreadfully vulgar, I know, but Usk Hall is, in reality, no better than a private hell. But what will your fidus Achates, Mr. Portland, say to our going so suddenly?"

"Let him say what he likes," replied the Earl, quickly. "I can't be always answerable to him for my actions. We'll go straight from here to Wiesbaden, and join my mother. No one can reasonably find fault with that."

"No one has a right to find fault with anything you may do," said Nora, though her curiosity was aroused by hearing her husband speak so curtly of the opinion of his closest friend, "and I'm with you, Ilfracombe, for one. When do you think we can start? The day after to-morrow? That will be Thursday."

"Couldn't we manage it to-morrow morning?" asked the Earl, anxiously. "You received some letters by this afternoon's post. Say you didn't open them till bedtime, and then found this one from my mother, begging us to join her at once, as she is ill. Make Denham pack your trunks to-night, and send word of your intentions to Lady Bowmant the first thing in the morning. Can't you manage it?"

"O Ilfracombe, what an arch deceiver and plotter you would make," cried the Countess, laughing; "but, really and truly, I don't think we can be off quite as soon as that. I'm not sure we should get a train to London to suit us. Besides, unless the Dowager were dying, such extreme haste would look very suspicious."

"Well, let her die, then. You know what I mean. Say the old lady is in extremis, and we can easily revive her as soon as we get over to Wiesbaden."
"But what is the necessity for such extraordinary haste?" demanded Nora. "It cannot only be because you have lost money over this visit. Surely, the delay of a day or two cannot make much difference, in comparison with running the risk of offending people who have honestly wished to give us pleasure. You know what my opinion has been all along, Ilfracombe, that Mr. Portland leads you into a great deal of folly, and I shall be but too thankful if this is the end of it; still, we owe something to the hospitality of the Bowmants, and now we are here, I cannot see what harm a day or two more can do us."

The Earl saw that he was worsted in the argument, so he contented himself with begging his wife to make arrangements to leave Usk as soon as she could, determining, inwardly, not to lose sight of her if possible till she had done so. The announcement, next morning, of their intended departure gave general dissatisfaction. The Bowmants declared they had not seen half the beauties of the surrounding country, and that they had just made arrangements for a picnic party and a dance and a lot of other gaieties. Nora expressed her sorrow at the necessity of cutting their visit short; but the Earl said little and gave one the impression that the sudden determination had not originated with himself. Jack Portland, for one, took it so, and seized the first opportunity he could to speak to Nora on the subject.

"Well, my lady," he commenced, "and so this is your doing, is it?—your little plan for dragging Ilfracombe from the jaws of the sharks?"

"I don't understand you," said Lady Ilfracombe.

"O yes, you do! This sudden idea of leaving the Hall emanated from your fertile brain alone. Ilfracombe had no idea of it yesterday. He told me he was enjoying himself up to date and should remain here as long as I did. But you got hold of him last night and forced the poor fellow to follow your lead. I see through it all as plain as a pike-staff."

"Then you are utterly mistaken, Mr. Portland. I had nothing to do with it. My husband told me yesterday that he wished to go, and it was with some difficulty that I persuaded him not to leave this morning. But that would have seemed so rude to the Bowmants."
“But what is at the bottom of it?”
“Y’hear me tell Lady Bowmant that we have received
a letter from Wiesbaden to say that——”
“O stop that rot, do!” exclaimed Mr. Portland, elegantly;
“we can put all that in our eyes and see none the worse for
it. It’s the real reason I want to know.”
“I have no other to give you.”
“Now, look here, Nora,” said Jack Portland, turning
round short to confront her, “I told you very plainly when
we talked business over at Thistlemere, that I would not
brook your interference between Ilfracombe and myself.
You have not taken my caution, and must be prepared
for the consequences. I daresay you have not forgotten them.”
“Of course not,” replied Nora, coolly, though her heart
beat rapidly with apprehension; “but in this instance you
blame me unfairly. I give you my word of honor—I swear
before heaven, if that will please you better—that I have
had nothing to do with this change in our plans; indeed, I
argued against it. It was entirely my husband’s propo-
sition; and if you want any other reason but the one I have
given you, you must seek it from himself.”
“Very well; we will drop that branch of the argument.
But if you did not originate it, you must prevent it. If
you choose to do it, it is in your power, and if you do not
choose to do it—well!”
He finished off with a shrug of his broad shoulders, the
interpretation of which she knew to be “take the conse-
quences.”
“You mean that you will produce those letters?” she
said, quickly.
“I do.”
“And if I consent to use my influence to induce Ilfrac-
combe to remain here, what is to be my reward?”
Mr. Portland did not immediately answer, and his silence
roused her fears. Nora had often questioned herself which
would be the best means by which to regain possession of
her letters. She had tried force and argument and entreaty,
and all three had failed. This cruel wretch kept her under
his thumb by the mere retention of that little packet. She
was a woman of courage and determination, and, by hook
or by crook, she meant to have it. Had she lived in a
more barbarous time, she would have slunk after him as he went to his nightly rest and stabbed him, without any compunction, in the back, and been pleased to watch his death-struggles and to hiss into his ear, at the last, that she was revenged. But, however much we may occasionally long to take the law into our own hands, the nineteenth century holds certain obstacles against it. Nora was a woman, also, of finesse and intrigue. She had several times argued whether, in lieu of other ways, she could bring herself to profess a lurking affection for Jack Portland that should bring him once more to her feet, as in the olden days, and make him give for a fancied love what force had no power to wrest from him. This idea flashed into her mind again as she waited for his reply, and felt she would sacrifice everything, except her honor, to bend him to her will.

"What is to be my reward?" she repeated. "If I do as you ask, will you give me the packet?"

Unwittingly, he played into her hands.

"What is to be my reward if I do?" he asked.

In a moment Nora had made up her mind. If the great stake at issue—a stake, the winning of which meant to secure the happiness of her whole life, was to be won by finesse, she would put forth all the finesse in her power to gain it, never mind what the consequences might be. So she looked at him, coquettishly, and said, like the arch-actress he had once called her:

"What reward do you want, Jack, beside the condition you have already named?"

"Come, that's better," said Mr. Portland. "I haven't seen a smile like that on your ladyship's face for many a day. What I want is, a little more affectionate interest from you, Nora—a little more cordiality to your husband's best friend—a little more familiarity with him before other people, that they may see he is enfant gâté du maison! I am sure you understand me; also, that you can comply with my wishes, if you choose. Be more like what you were in Malta, and I shall feel my reward is equal to my sacrifice."

"And the sacrifice, Jack," she continued—"that is to be delivering up the letters you hold of mine?"

"Certainly, if you care to have them. Now, Nora, I will
make a bargain with you. You shall have your letters as soon as ever you consent to fetch them with your own fair hands."

"To fetch them?" she echoed, wonderingly.

"To fetch them! Did I not speak plainly? They are over at Panty-cuckoo Farm with my other things. If you will come to my room this evening, I will engage to deliver your letters to you myself."

He had thought she would have repudiated the proposal as a fresh insult; but, to his surprise, she answered, firmly:

"I will come! If these are your only conditions, Jack, I agree to them. It is a risqué thing to do, but I will do it. I trust to your honor too implicitly to be afraid of your permitting any scandal to accrue from the act. And if you fulfill your promise, Ilfracombe shall stay on at Usk Hall as long as you do. Is the bargain sealed?"

"It is," replied Mr. Portland, with the utmost surprise.

He had not entertained the faintest idea that Nora would agree to visit him at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Was it possible she still retained an inkling of affection for him, and had her constrained manner since her marriage been a blind for her real feelings? Men are so conceited where the beau sexe is concerned, that Jack Portland, bloated and disfigured as he was by excess and dissipation, was yet quite ready to believe that the Countess Ilfracombe had been unable to resist the feelings raised in her breast by meeting him again. He had made the proposal that she should fetch her letters herself, because he thought she would guess from that that he had no intention of giving them up to her; but when she consented to do so, he determined to make her secret visit to him one more terror by which to force her to influence her husband as he should direct. Now he hardly knew what he should do. She was coming. That was the extraordinary part of it. Without any pressing or entreaty, the Countess Ilfracombe was actually coming over to his room at night, to secure her packet of letters. Well, it was the very "rummiest go" he had ever heard of in his life before.

"You must be very careful that you are not seen to leave the Hall," he said to her.
Now that she had agreed to come, he began to wish he had never said anything about it. What if his dear friend Ilfracombe got wind of the matter? Would not that render his wife's efforts, on Mr. Portland's behalf, futile ever afterwards? The Earl was very suave, and easily led, but Jack Portland knew him too well to suppose he would ever forgive an offense against his honor. If Nora's good name were compromised by his nearest and dearest friend, that friend would have to go, if the parting broke his heart. Added to which, Mr. Portland had no idea of getting into even an imaginary scrape for Lady Ilfracombe. He did not like her well enough. He regarded her only as a convenient tool in his hands, which he had no intention of letting go.

"Perhaps, after all," he said, cautiously, "you had better not risk it. It would be a risk, you know, and it would be awkward to have to give Ilfracombe an explanation of the affair, wouldn't it?"

"I shall be careful to run no risk," was her reply.

"But suppose some of the farm people should see you? What excuse could you make for being there?"

"I should make no excuse at all. I have as much right as other people, I suppose, to take a moonlight ramble. What time shall I meet you? It must not be too late, as I must go up-stairs when the other ladies do."

"That is not very early, as a rule," said her companion. "Let us say midnight. Ilfracombe will be safe in the card or billiard room at that time, and not likely to notice what you are about."

"And how will you manage to leave the party without observation?"

"I shall trust to chance; but you may be sure I shall be there. And—and—if you fail me, Nora, why, I shall understand that you value your reputation more than you do—me, or your husband's good opinion, because in that case—"

"I understand. You need not recapitulate. But I shall not fail you. It will seem quite like old times, having an assignation with you, Jack. Do you remember the night I met you, down by the landing place at Valetta, and that horrid man, Petro, followed me all the way, and only
showed his ugly face just as I had reached your side? I always believed that it was Petro who betrayed us to papa, for he was, sometimes, very impertinent in his manner to me afterwards. O and have you forgotten the time when you took me out in a boat, and we got caught in a squall, and had to put in to shore, and remained nearly the whole day away in a little estaminet? What a fearful row papa made about it, and I had to pretend I had been alone, though I don’t think he believed me. Papa certainly did hate you, Jack, though I never could understand why. I suppose it was all the money, or, rather, the lack of it."

And here Nora heaved a most deceitful sigh.

"Do you ever regret that there was any obstacle between us?" asked Mr. Portland, persuasively. "Do you think you could have been happy as Mrs. Jack Portland, if Ilfracombe had not come between us?"

"Why, of course, I told you at the time I should," said Nora.

"Ah! well, perhaps things are better as they are," replied her companion; "for I don’t think you were ever cut out for a poor man’s wife. You are too pretty and dainty and refined, my lady, for that. And if you had been miserable, I should have been so, also. And so you really like me well enough, still, to meet me at the farm this evening, and fetch your dear little letters. I shall be so glad to have you for a few moments to myself. It will seem quite like the dear old times. Here, I can never say half a dozen words to you, without as many old cats prying into our faces. Well, au revoir, my dear. Be punctual, as our time will be limited. Twelve o’clock to-night. I had better not stand talking to you any longer, now."

"I will be there," answered the Countess, mechanically, as she turned round, and walked another way.
CHAPTER IV.

Hugh Owen was in a burning rage. From the high road he had witnessed Nell’s meeting with the Earl Ilfracombe, and he put the worst construction upon what he saw. Because this young man was a minister, it must not be supposed that he was naturally amiable and good. On the contrary, he possessed a very high temper, and, at times, an ungovernable one, and it was raging now. He had perceived a marked difference in Nell, lately. She was not the same girl who had confessed her grievous fault to him in Pantycuckoo Farm, nor promised so sweetly to follow his fortunes to South Africa in the long meadow, subsequently. For a little while after the latter event, she had been very subdued and gentle with him, as though she were contemplating the serious step to which she had conditionally pledged herself; but since the folks had returned to Usk Hall, she had declined either to walk with him or talk with him. Her old, feverish, excitable manner had seemed to return, though Hugh had not liked to connect it with the fact of the Hall being occupied, until the fatal moment when he was passing by Sir Archibald’s field and witnessed Nell and the Earl in close conversation. Who could she be talking with? What could she have to say to him? Why were their faces so close together? These were the questions that haunted poor Hugh for hours afterwards, and to which he could find no satisfactory solution. He could not trust himself to confront Nell as she went back to the farm—he was afraid of what he might say to her, so he resolved to sleep over it, if the restless, miserable, disturbed slumbers which followed his discovery could be called sleep. But, on the next day, he felt he must know the reason of what he had seen. The remembrance of it came between him and his duties. He would not be able to preach and pray with an earnest and single heart until it had been relieved of the awful doubt that assailed it. So, the day after, he set forth for the farm and found Nell,
for a wonder, alone and free to receive him. The fact is, she did not dare go out, as she had been used to do, lately, for fear of encountering Lord Ilfracombe in the company of his wife or friends. She felt as if she could not bear the sight—as if she should proclaim her right to him before all the world. And that would make him angry—he, who loved her still above all other things, for so had she interpreted his words of the night before. She had been in a state of beatification ever since, and her mother knew no more what to make of her present mood than she had done of her previous one. It would be difficult to say what Nell expected or believed would come of the interview which had made her so happy. Apparently, she had given herself no time to think. She knew perfectly well that her intimacy with Ilfracombe was over and done with, and that, thenceforward, she could have no part nor lot in him or his affairs. She knew she should never enter his house again, nor associate with his acquaintances, nor enjoy any of his good things. Yet she felt supremely happy. To understand her feelings, one must not only be a woman—one must be a woman who has loved and lost, and found that, whatever the loss, the love remained as it was. Women have greater faith than men, as a rule, in the unseen and the compensations of an after-life. They think more of the heart than of the body of the creature they love, and give them the hope of a reunion in another world—of retaining the eternal affections of the man they care for, and they will try and content themselves with the thought of the future. Far better that, they say, than his companionship on earth, whilst his heart is the property of some other woman. The Earl had managed to deceive Nell so well, without intending to deceive her, that she was already disposed to pity Lady Ilfracombe, who could only lay claim to his worldly goods. As she had told him: "Say you love me best of all the world, and the other woman can have your title and your money." She had sat indoors all day, dreaming over the unexpected happiness that had come to her—recalling, in fancy, every word he had uttered—every look he had given—every kiss he had pressed upon her happy mouth. The wretched interval that lay between them had vanished like a dream. She had forgotten the
abject misery with which she had received the news of his marriage—the despairing attempt at suicide that followed it—her return home and the apathetic existence she had led since—all had disappeared under the magic touch of love. She was no longer Nell o' Panty-cuckoo Farm, as the neighbors called her; she was Lord Ilfracombe's housekeeper, the woman he had chosen to be the mistress of his home. She was his love, his lady, his daily companion. She looked with a kind of pathetic curiosity at the print dress she wore, at the simple arrangement of her chestnut hair, at her ringless fingers and wrists, unadorned by bangles. They had all gone—the silks and satins, the golden combs and hairpins, the jewels and laces; but _he_ remained, the pride and jewel of her life—"Vernie" loved her.

It was so wonderful; so delightful; so unexpected, that her head swum when she thought of it. She was just considering whether she might not venture to stroll up the long field again that evening—whether "Vernie" might not come out as he had done the evening before, in hopes of meeting her, when Hugh Owen raised the latch of the farm-house door, and walked unceremoniously in. His entrance annoyed Nell. It disturbed her beautiful reverie; put to flight all her golden dreams, and made her fear lest his visit might be prolonged, so as to interfere with her plans. The welcome he received, therefore, was not, to say the least of it, cordial.

"Neither father nor mother are at home, Hugh," she said, as she caught sight of him, "and I am just going out. You've come at an unlucky moment."

"So I always seem to come, now," he answered. "But I have a word or two to say to you, Nell, that can't be put off, so I must ask you to listen to me for a few moments, first."

"They must be very few, then, for I've got work of my own to do," she replied.

"It's the work you do that I've come to speak to you about," said the young man, "and I claim the right to do so. I was sauntering up and down the road last night, Nell, in the hope of catching sight of you, when I saw you cross the meadow over there and meet a man, and talk to him for better than half an hour. Who was he?"
Nell flared up in her impetuous manner, at once.

"And what business is that of yours?" she exclaimed.

"Why, every business in the world. Whose should it be, but mine? Haven't you promised to be my wife?"

"No!" cried the girl, boldly.

"No! What, not in the long meadow, behind father's house?" he returned, in astonishment.

"I said, if my people ever emigrated, which they never will do, that I would go with them as your wife; but that was only a conditional promise, and I've altered my mind since then. I shall never be anybody's wife now."

"If I saw rightly last night, Nell, perhaps it will be as well. Who was the gentleman you met and talked with for so long? What is he to you? Where have you met him before? What had you to say to him?"

"Which of your questions will you have answered first?" asked Nell, "and what is it to you, who I choose to talk to? Are you my master, or am I a child to be catechised after this fashion? I shall see and speak to whom I like, and I refuse to say anything more about it."

"Nell," said Hugh, in a sorrowful voice, "when you told me your history, I was truly sorry for you. I thought what a terrible thing it was that such a respectable girl should lower herself to the level of the lowest of her sex. But I believed it was a misfortune—a step into which you had been led with your eyes shut—and that you regarded it with horror and loathing. I must have thought so, you know, or I should never have proposed to make you my wife."

"Well, and what is all this tirade leading to?" said Nell.

She felt sorry for Hugh, but not a bit ashamed of herself, and the impossibility of explaining the matter to him made her irritable and pert.

"To a very sorrowful conclusion, Nell. I have seen, ever since this party of gentlemen and ladies came to the Hall, that you are altered. You have become restless and uneasy; you have refused to walk out with me any more, and you have avoided my company. I can only put two and two together, and draw my conclusions from that. I have often heard it said, that if once a woman is led astray,
to lead what people call a ‘gay life’ she is never contented with a quiet, domestic existence again; but I was loath to believe it of you, who seemed so truly sorry for the past, and all the shame and disgrace it had brought you. But what am I to think now? I see you, with my own eyes, meet a man, who looked to me, in the gleaming, like a gentleman, and talk familiarly with him, and yet you won’t tell me his name, nor what your business was with him.”

“No, I won’t,” she replied, determinately; “because it is no concern of yours.”

“But, I say, it is my concern and the concern of everybody that has an interest in you, Nell. Where there is deceit there must be wrong. Do your father and mother know this gentleman and of your meeting him? Did you tell them?”

“I did not, and I shall not. It is my private affair, and I shall keep it entirely to myself.”

The young man rose indignantly.

“Then I’ll tell you now what I didn’t like to mention before, and that is, that I saw him kiss you. I am sure of it from the closeness with which he held you. O for shame, Nell, for shame!”

“And what if he did?” cried Nell, with crimson cheeks. “That, also, is my own business and not yours.”

“Your business, yes, and you may keep it so!” exclaimed Hugh Owen, hotly, as his eyes blazed with anger. “I see you now, Nell Llewellyn, in your true colors, and would to God I had known you from the first. Your penitence was all assumed, put on to catch an unwary fool like myself because there was no one better within reach. Your sorrow, too, for the loss of your lover was another sham, easily consoled by the kisses of a stranger. You are not a true woman, Nell; you are unfit for the love or consideration of any honest man. You are an outcast and a wanton, and I will never willingly speak to you again.”

“I will take good care you don’t,” cried Nell, in her turn. “I have more powerful friends than you think for—friends who will not see me insulted by a common farmer’s son. I know I promised, conditionally, to be your wife, but I did it for your sake, not my own. I should have hated the life—the very thought is distasteful to me. So never think
of me in that light or any light again. I break off with you from this moment. The man I met last night is worth ten thousand of you. I value his little finger more than your whole body. I would rather beg my bread with a gentleman than sit on a throne with a clod like you! Now you have the whole truth. Make what you like of it!"

"O stop, stop, in mercy to yourself, stop!" cried the young man, as, with both hands clasped to his ears, he ran out of the house.

Nell felt rather subdued when left to herself. She was not quite sure how far she had betrayed her secret—or if she had said anything in her wrath to lead to Lord Ilfracombe's identity. But, on revision, she thought not. Hugh did not know the name of her former lover—he had not heard those of the guests at the Hall—there was no chance of his gaining a knowledge of the truth. And, as for the rest, it was just as well he had seen for himself that they could never be more to each other than they were at present. And then she resolved into another of the pleasing daydreams, from which his entrance had disturbed her. Her father and mother came bustling in, after a little while, full of complaints and anxiety. One of their best cows had shown symptoms of dangerous illness, and every remedy that the farm could boast of was set in motion at once.

"Come, my lass," cried Mrs. Llewellyn, as she entered the parlor, "you must bestir yourself and help me. Father and I are in sad trouble. Bonnie is as bad as she can be, and if we can't stop the symptoms she'll be dead before the morning. Aye, but misfortunes never seem to come single; what with the raising of the rent and other troubles. I've set Betty to put on all the hot water she can, and we must choose the oldest blankets we have for fomentations. Bring the lamp with you, Nell; I want to find the proper medicines in father's chest."

The girl snatched up the light and followed her mother to where Mr. Llewellyn kept a chest full of veterinary drugs. "That ain't it, and that ain't it," the old woman kept on saying, as she pulled bottle after bottle to the light—"ah! I think this is the stuff that cured Daisy last year."

She pulled out the cork with her teeth and tasted a little
of the brown, nauseous-looking mixture, but spat it out immediately on the floor.

"God save us! that's the lotion for the sheeps' backs—deadly poison. Don't you ever touch that, my girl. It'll take the skin off your tongue in no time."

"Am I likely?" remonstrated Nell, seriously; "but suppose you had given it to the poor cow by mistake? Why don't you label it plainly, 'Poison,' mother, and then there would be no fear of an accident."

"Aye, my lass, that's a good thought. Don't put it back, Nell, but carry it to your bedroom, and put it atop of the wardrobe. It will be safe enough there, and when we're a bit less busy, you shall write a label for it. It's arsenic, I believe. I know, last year, father give a drop or two to one of the cats that was bad in its inside, and the poor beast was dead in a few minutes. This is the cow's mixture," said Mrs. Llewellyn, pulling out a second bottle from the recesses of the old trunk; "not dissimilar looking, are they? but lor! what a difference in their effects. This is some of the finest stuff we ever had; made from a recipe of Farmer Owen's. Take it down to father at once, Nell, for he's in a hurry for it, and I'll fetch the blanket. And don't forget to put the other atop of your wardrobe," she called out after her daughter. The poor cow was very bad, and for some hours the whole household was occupied in providing remedies, and applying them. When ten o'clock struck, and the animal was pronounced to be out of danger, Nell was regularly tired out, and hardly inclined to sit down to supper with her parents. But the farmer would not hear of her leaving them.

"Come on, lass," he said, "I've news for you, only this bothering cow put it clean out of my head. Grand news, Nellie. You'll never guess it, not if you tried for a twelve-month."

Nell returned to the table, white and scared-looking.

"News about me, father?" she said.

"Well, not about you, exactly, but that concerns you all the same. Now, who do you suppose has come to the Hall and is staying along of Sir Archibald?"

Then she knew he had heard of Lord Ilfracombe's arrival, and set her teeth, lest she should betray herself.
"How should I know, father?" she said, tremblingly. "I haven't been near Mrs. Hody for the last week. Is it the Prince whom they expected?"

"The Prince be d——d!" exclaimed the farmer. "What's the value of a foreign prince beside one of our own English noblemen? I wouldn't give you that for the Prince!" snapping his fingers. "No; it's somebody much better and higher. It's your old master, the Earl Ilfracombe, and his lady. What do you think of that?"

"The Earl Ilfracombe!" echoed Nell, in order to gain time; "but who told you, father?"

"Jackson, the coachman, to be sure, who drove them both home from the railway station; and who should know better than he? He says the Earl is a fine-looking young man, as fair as daylight, and his lady is a nice, pretty creature, too. I thought I should surprise you, Nell. You'll be wanting to go up to the Hall to see 'em both now, won't you?"

"O father, why should I go to see them? His lordship won't want to see me. Most likely he's forgotten my very name."

"Well, Nell, I am surprised to hear you talk so!" exclaimed her mother. "It don't look as if you knew much about the gentry, who are always glad to see servants as have behaved themselves whilst in their service. But perhaps you're afraid the Earl is annoyed with you for leaving him so suddenly and just as he was bringing home his bride. Is that it?"

"Perhaps so, mother," said the girl, looking very much confused.

"Ah, I was always doubtful if there wasn't something queer about your coming back so suddenly, and so I've told your mother," remarked Mr. Llewellyn, dubiously; "but, if it was so, why, you must go over to the Hall to-morrow morning and ask his lordship's pardon, and perhaps mother here can find some little thing as you could take up as an offering for his lady, can you, mother?"

"O I daresay," replied Mrs. Llewellyn; "she might fancy a pen of our Minorca fowls or Cochins. I suppose they've a fine farm down at Thistlemere, Nell?"

"Yes, I suppose so; but, mother, I cannot go and see them or take Lady Ilfracombe any presents. It will seem
like intrusion. They've not asked to see me, and I'm only a discharged servant, after all."

"Rubbish! Nonsense! What are you talking about?" exclaimed the old farmer, angrily. "A discharged servant! Why, didn't you tell mother and me that you gave his lordship warning yourself? Haven't you told the truth about your leaving? Is there anything hid under it all, as we know nothing about? Come, now, no more secrets, if you please; let us have the plain truth at once, or I will go up the first thing in the morning and see his lordship myself."

"Lor! father, don't be so hard on the lass," exclaimed his wife; "you've turned her as white as a lily with your noise. What should be under it except that the maid wanted to come home, and time enough, too, after being three years away. Don't you mind him, Nell, my girl. He's just put out and cranky about the cow. If you don't want to see his lordship, why, no more you shall. Here, sup up your beer and get to bed. I don't half like the way in which you flushes on and off. It's just how my sister's girl went off in a waste. You sha'n't be worried to do anything as you don't wish to, take my word for it."

"That's how you fools of women go on together, without a thought of the business and how it's going to the devil!" grumbled her husband. "Here's Lord Ilfracombe, come here, as you may say, in the very nick of time, and Nell the very one to ask a favor of him, and you cram her head with a pack o' nonsense about not going near him. Sir Archibald is going to raise the rent and send us all to the workhouse, when a word from his lordship might turn his mind the other way, especially if Nell put to him, on account of her long service and good character, and you tell her not to do it. Bah! I've no patience with you."

"O that's a different thing!" quoth the old woman. "If Nell can get Lord Ilfracombe to plead with Sir Archibald on our account, why, of course, she'll do it, for her own sake as well as ours, won't you, my lass?"

"Plead with Lord Ilfracombe?" cried Nell, hysterically. "No, no! indeed, I cannot. What has he to do with Sir Archibald's rents? He is only a guest in the house. It would be too much to ask. It would place him in an un-
pleasant position. I would not presume to do such a thing."

Both her parents rounded on her at once.

"Well, of all the ungrateful hussies as I ever saw," said her father, "you're the worst! You come home to see your poor parents toiling and moiling to keep a roof above their heads, and nigh breaking their hearts over the raising of the rent and the idea of having to leave the old homestead, and you refuse even to speak a word to save them from starvation!"

"Well, I never did!" cried her mother. "Here you've been home for nearly a year and no more use than a baby, what with your London training, and your illness and your fid-fads, and the first thing your poor father asks you to do for him, you downright refuse. I didn't think it of you, Nell, and I begin to fear, like father, that there must be something under it all as you're afraid to let us know."

"But I shall know it for all that," said the farmer, "for I'll see this fine lord with the break of day and ask him downright under what circumstances you left his service. If he's a gentleman, he'll answer the question, and give me some satisfaction. I won't put up with this sort of treatment from you no longer, my lass, and so I give you plain notice."

"Very well. Do as you like. It's all the same to me," cried Nell, as she rose from the table and rushed from the room.

Her sleeping apartment was over the lodgers' rooms, and as she reached it, she locked the door and flung herself on the bed, face downwards, in an agony of apprehension. What was going to happen next? she asked herself—what was to be the next scene in her life's tragedy? Would her irate father force the truth from the Earl or would he guess it from his embarrassment? Would the story come to the ears of the Countess and make mischief between her husband and herself? There seemed to be no end to the horrors that might happen from her father having gained knowledge of the proximity of her former employer. And if he confided his doubts to Hugh Owen, or any of the Dale Farm party, might not he add his quota to the chapter of horrors by relating what he had witnessed in the field the
night before? Poor Nell could get no rest that night for thinking of these things, and wondering how she should come out of them all. She rose, after awhile, and bathed her burning and swollen eyelids in cold water, and took a seat by the open casement and gazed out into the calm, peaceful night. The air was warm and balmy, but there were few stars, and the moon was in her first quarter. How long she had sat there, she did not know, till she heard the church clock chiming the hour of twelve, and thought to herself that it was time she lay down on her bed. But, just as she was about to do so, her attention was arrested by the figure of a woman walking slowly and furtively over the grass beneath the window. Nell did not know who she was, nor what she came for; but, not unnaturally supposing that she would not be there at that time of night unless she needed the assistance of her mother or herself, in some sudden emergency, she waited quietly until the stranger should knock or call out in order to summon her. To her surprise, however, the woman did not go round to the principal entrance to the farm-house, but lingered about the grass plat, walking backwards and forwards, and occasionally glancing over her shoulder in the direction of the Hall. Nell’s curiosity was now fully aroused, but she made no sign to arrest the attention of the visitor. On the contrary, she drew further back from the window, so as to be entirely concealed by the dimity curtain that shaded it. From this vantage ground she, presently, saw the woman joined by a man, whom she at once recognized as Mr. Portland. Nell’s first feeling was indignation that he should presume to make her mother’s house a place of assignation; but when he commenced to talk, she could only listen, spell-bound.
CHAPTER V.

"And so you have kept your word, my lady?" he said, nonchalantly.
"Had you any doubt that I should do so?" she answered.
"It would not have been the first time if you had broken it," was the sarcastic rejoinder.
"Now, look here, Jack," said the woman, "you have not brought me here at this time of night to upbraid me for the inevitable past, surely. You must know that I run a fearful risk in coming here. You must know, also, that only one object on earth would have brought me. Be merciful as you are great, and don't keep me fooling my time away in order to listen to your platitudes. Isn't the subject of our former relations with each other rather stale?"

"It will never be stale to me, Nora," replied Mr. Portland; "and the melancholy fact that you preferred Ilfracombe to myself is not likely to make me forget it."

"Ilfracombe!" thought Nell, from her post of observation. "Can this really be the Countess? O how grossly she must be deceiving him! Prefer Ilfracombe to him! Why, of course, it must be she. I will hear every word they say, now, if I die for it."

"That is nonsense," resumed Nora; "you never really cared for me, Jack, and if you did, the sentiment has died long ago. Don't let us twaddle, pray, but come to business."

"I thought the twaddle, as you call it, was part of our business; but I am willing to let it drop. What has your ladyship to say next?"

"I want to ask you something, which I have been afraid to mention, with so many eavesdroppers as we have round us at the Hall. You knew that chère amie of Ilfracombe's—Miss Llewellyn—of course?"

"I did. Every one who knew him knew her. What of
it? Are you getting up a little jealousy of the dead for future use?"

"Don’t talk nonsense. Am I the sort of woman to go raving mad on account of my husband’s former peccadilloes? But what became of her?"

At this juncture, Nell became keenly attentive. She thrust her head as far as she dared out of the window, and did not lose a single word.

"By Jove! no," laughed Portland. "I cannot imagine your ladyship being jealous of anything or any one who had not the power to take your beloved coronet from you. But, surely, you know what become of the poor girl. She is dead. She drowned herself when Ilfracombe sent home word that he was about to marry you, and told old Sterndale to give her ‘the gentle kick-out.’"

"Poor child!" said the Countess, compassionately; "it was very terrible, if true. But what proofs were there of her doing so? Was the body ever found?"

"I believe not. But don’t talk of it, please. I had a sincere regard for Miss Llewellyn, and the thought of her dreadful end makes me sad."

"You feeling for any one of your fellow-creatures, Jack?" replied Nora, incredulously. "You must have been very hard hit. But I really want to know if there was any doubt of her death? I have a particular reason for asking."

"I heard there was no doubt. That is all I can tell you, Lady Ilfracombe."

"What was she like, Jack?" urged Nora.

"Very handsome, indeed; more than handsome, beautiful, with the most glorious golden chestnut hair imaginable, and large hazel eyes, with dark brows and lashes, and a straight nose and good mouth and chin. A lovely figure, too, tall and graceful, though with large hands and feet. A remarkable-looking young woman, Nora; and it is a feather in your cap to have driven her memory so completely from Ilfracombe’s heart."

"But I am not sure that I have driven it. Ilfracombe is very touchy on the subject now, and cannot bear her name to be mentioned. But I tell you what, Jack. She is no more dead than I am, for I have seen her."
A BANKRUPT HEART.

“My God! Where?” exclaimed Mr. Portland, excitedly. “Why, in this very house. Don’t you remember Sir Archibald telling us that the young woman who stopped Lady Bowmant’s cobs must have been one of the Llewellyns? I came over here the same afternoon to see her and thank her more particularly than I had been able to do; and if the girl I saw is not Nell Llewellyn, I’ll eat my hat. She answers to your description exactly.”

“You don’t mean to say so! It never entered into my calculations. I have made so sure that she was gone. Have you mentioned your suspicions to Ilfracombe?”

“No fear. I’m not such a fool as I look. Why should I raise up all the old feelings in him, just as he is settling down so nicely with me? But I should like to know if it is true, and to know for certain. It is a dreadful thing to have a girl’s death at one’s door. So I thought I would tell you and you could find out for me.”

“I will make a point of doing so, but I’m afraid you are laboring under a mistake. There was so little doubt of Miss Llewellyn’s death. The young woman you have seen may be a sister or other relation. It is worth while inquiring.”

“But don’t compromise Ilfracombe in doing so. He particularly begged me not to mention his name when I called here, in case they might be of the same family. But I mustn’t stay longer, Jack, so please let me have the letters.”

“All right. But you must come and fetch them.”

“Well, I am here, safe enough.”

“Perhaps, but the letters are not here. They are in my dispatch-box, in my room.”

“Go and bring them, then.”

“The bargain was that you were to fetch them, Nora.”

“But not to enter your room, Jack. I cannot do that. It is impossible. I refuse.”

“Then you can’t fetch the letters, my lady.”

“And have you brought me here to play me such an unfair trick as that? You knew that I could not enter your room. It would be risking the happiness of my whole future life. Supposing Mr. Lennox were to return suddenly and find me closeted there with you? You want to ruin me. I shall do no such thing.”
"You know now that you are only quibbling, Nora—only fighting with the inevitable. You will not rest till you have those letters in your own hands. You have told me you would give half your fortune to get them, and yet you refuse to pass the threshold of my room. What nonsense! You must devise some other means by which to procure them, then, for I will not go back from my word. I said you should have them if you would fetch them, and now that they are within your reach, you refuse to stretch out your hand and take them. Very well; it is not my fault. You must return without them."

Nora thought a minute, and then said: "What time is it?"

"Half-past twelve," replied her companion. "They will not break up over there for another hour and a half."

She knew she was as much within this man's power as if he held the proofs of some great crime which she had committed. She did not exactly remember what her foolish letters to him contained, but she was sure there was sufficient love-sick folly in them which, aided by his innuendoes and, even, falsehoods, might bring everlasting disgrace upon her, to say nothing of Ilfracombe's serious displeasure, which she dreaded still more. To lose her husband's trust and confidence and respect—perhaps his love—was too terrible a contingency in the young Countess' eyes. She had been guilty of a fearful social error in going to the farm at all—she knew that; but, now she was there, would it not be better to comply with Jack Portland's conditions, hard as they might be, than to return to the Hall, having played her escapade for nothing.

"Where are the letters?" was the next question she asked him.

"I have told you. In my dispatch box."

"But where is the box?"

"On a table, just within the door."

"Will you go in first and get them out, and then I will cross the threshold and take them from you?"

"Are you so terribly afraid of me as all that, Nora?"

"Not afraid of you or any man," she answered, haughtily, "but afraid of compromising my good name. It is too fearful a risk. Anything might happen. Mr. Lennox
might return or the people of the house come down, or — or — O Jack! if you ever loved me the least little bit, don’t ask me to do more than I have done.”

He appeared to be satisfied with her excuse, for Nell saw him leave her side and disappear within the house. In another minute, the Countess, who had stood looking anxiously after him, seemed to have received his signal, for she cautiously followed him. Then there was a silence of several minutes, during which Nell listened eagerly to hear what passed, but no sound reached her ear. The next thing she saw was the figure of Lady Ilfracombe, who left the house hurriedly, and, throwing herself down on the grass, burst into tears. It was a rare occurrence for Nora to lose command of herself, but to-night she felt utterly worsted and broken down. She had built so many fair hopes on this venture, and now she found herself as far from obtaining her wishes as ever.

“You are a brute!” she exclaimed, as Jack Portland joined her—“a false and merciless brute! You have lured me here under false pretences, and in order to get me only more surely in your toils. You knew you were deceiving me—you knew the letters were not there—you persuaded me to enter your room against all my better judgment, in order that I might compromise myself, and be more your slave than before. But there must be an end put to it some day. I will not go on being laughed at by you forever. I defy you to do your worst. Show Ilfracombe those letters, as you have so often threatened, and I will take good care the day you do so is the last you ever spend under any roof of mine.”

“Softly, softly, my lady,” said Portland. “Aren’t you going it a little too fast and making a little too much noise over this business? I give you my word of honor that I fully believed that interesting packet of letters was in my dispatch box.”

“Your word of honor!” repeated Nora, disdainfully, as she rose from her despairing attitude, and stood up, wiping her wet eyes. “How long have you possessed the article?”

“Now, Nora, none of your sneers, if you please,” said Jack Portland. “Don’t be foolish and make a regular
quarrel of this matter.  Let me tell you this: that so long as you insult me on every occasion, I shall never give you back those letters.  After all, they are legally mine, and you have no right to demand their restoration.  If I return them, it will be as a favor, and people do not, as a rule, grant favors to ladies who call them liars and scoundrels and cheats for their pains.  And now, had you not better go back to the Hall?  I have shown you what I can do by bringing you here, and I don't mean to do anything more for you to-night.  When you have learned how to coax and wheedle a little, instead of bully and storm, perhaps you may persuade me to give you back those much longed-for letters."

The Countess seemed to be perfectly subdued.  To those who knew her as she generally was, and especially to the man before her, the change in her voice and demeanor would have seemed a marvel.

"Yes, I will go," she replied, in a meek tone; "but I should like to have a few words with you first, Jack.  I cannot think what has changed you so, but you are not the same man you were at Malta.  Still, I do not think you can have quite forgotten that time, when we first met and thought we loved each other.  It was my father, Sir Richard Abinger, who separated us, as you know well, and even if he had not done so, I do not think you would have wished to marry me, for you had no income, and I should only have been a great burden to you.  So is it quite fair, do you think, to visit the fact of our parting on my head, especially now that I am married to another man?  Those letters of mine—written to you when I considered we were engaged lovers—I daresay they are very silly and spooney and full of the nonsense people generally write under such circumstances, but I cannot think there is anything compromising in them, as you would lead me to believe.  I feel sure, if I were to show them to my husband, he would forgive and absolve me from all thought of wrong.  But will you not spare me such an act of self-humiliation?  Cannot you be man enough to forgive a girl who has never done you any harm, for having caused you a little mortification?  Will you not do so—for the sake of Malta and the time when you thought you loved me?"

Nora's voice was so sorrowful and yet so full of dignity
as she pronounced these words, that Nell’s heart burned within her to listen to them, and she longed to have the power to steal those letters and restore them to her, spite of all Mr. Jack Portland’s machinations. And as she sat there, she clinched her hands together, and said to herself that, if it were to be done, she would do it. She had not been unmindful of Nora’s kindness when she visited her under the guise of Mrs. Lumley, though she had so ill requited it; and now that she knew who she was, and that it was Ilfracombe’s unloved wife who had had her ring and money flung back in her face, Nell’s generous nature asserted itself, and she inwardly avowed that, if she could do her a good turn, she would.

"Why are you so very anxious to get these letters back, especially if there’s nothing in them?" asked Mr. Portland.

"It’s not because you’re so deuced fond of Ilfracombe, that you trouble for his peace of mind, surely. You’ve got your coronet out of him, and what on earth do you want more? You are not going to stuff me up with any humbug about your having fallen in love with him—because I sha’n’t believe it if you do. You married him for a settlement—you never left him alone till you had hooked him—and now you’ve got the poor gull fast, what harm can that little packet of letters do him, or you, even if I should take it into my head some day to bring you to order by showing them to him, eh?"

Even in the dim light of the starless sky, Nell could see the Countess twisting her lace handkerchief nervously about in her hands, as she answered her tormentor:

"Yes, you are right. I married Ilfracombe because I thought it a fine thing to become a countess, and to be presented at Court, and have a large fortune, and everything that I could require. But—I don’t feel like that now. I—I—love him."

"You love him!" echoed Portland, with a coarse laugh.

"That’s the best joke I ever heard in my life. Do you suppose he cares for you? Why, he only married you, because his people were always after him to get rid of poor Miss Llewellyn, and settle down respectfully."

"O no, no, don’t say that!" cried the Countess, in a tone of unmistakable anguish.
"But I do say it, and I could bring forward dozens of fellows to corroborate my statement. Ilfracombe adored Nell Llewellyn—so did she, him. Do you suppose she would have committed suicide, else? Would you risk your precious life, or still more precious coronet, for any man on earth?"

"Yes, I could—for Ilfracombe," she answered, tremulously.

"I can put all that in my eye, and see none the worse," continued Portland. "But, at any rate, your devotion is thrown away. His lordship cares more for Miss Llewellyn's memory than he does for your living self. You may represent his station in life to him—perhaps, his prospective family—but she was his love."

"You are very cruel to me," faltered Nora, "though, perhaps, I have deserved your contempt and irony. But no one could live with Ilfracombe, and not love him. He is so generous—so considerate—so unselfish, that a woman would be insensible to every good influence, not to feel grateful to him, in return. And, as for poor Miss Llewellyn, you are mistaken if you imagine you have been the first to tell me of his esteem for her, and sorrow for her untimely loss. He has told me all about it himself, and I have sympathized deeply with him. My husband has no secrets from me, as I earnestly desire not to have any from him. Were it not for these unfortunate letters, I should have none. But you have tortured me too far, Jack. I throw up the sponge. I shall tell Ilfracombe, on the first opportunity, of the boasted hold you have over me, and beg him to end it one way or the other. Let him read the letters, and do his worst. It can never be so bad as yours. You have made my married life a torment to me by your unmanly threats."

She turned away from him as she concluded, and commenced to toil up the steep acclivity that led to the gate. But Jack Portland sprung after her.

"I am not going to let you go alone," he said. "Come, Nora, let us part better friends than this. Forgive me for being a little amused at the idea of you and old Ilfracombe having a quiet 'spoon' together, and trust me that he shall never trace any annoyance that may accrue from your former little follies, to my door."
The Countess did not appear to make any answer to this harangue, and Nell watched them ascend the hill together, and pass out of the white gate.

"And how long is Jack Portland to be trusted?" she thought, as they disappeared. "Just so long as it suits him, and then he will hold his unmanly threats over that poor woman's head again. Well, I've no particular reason to love her, heaven knows; but I can do her this kindness in return for hers, and I will, if only to keep his name unstained by the tongue of such a scoundrel as Jack Portland. They have gone to the Hall, and he will probably not be back for another hour. Now's the time. If I wait till daylight, mother will be about, and liable to break in upon me at any moment. I will slip down at once."

She lighted a taper, and, shading it with her hand, crept softly down the stairs that led to the bricked passage, and so into the lodgers' rooms. That occupied by Mr. Portland lay to the left. The door was ajar. Nell had only to push it gently open in order to enter. She set her light down on a table, and glanced around her. All was in perfect order, except the much talked-of dispatch box, which had been left open, with its contents tumbled over. Nell did not believe that the packet of letters was not there. It was very unlikely that Jack Portland would not know what was in his box or what was not. He had intended to hand it to the Countess, but changed his mind at the last moment. She looked carefully through the contents of the box, but found no packet. She had replaced the papers carefully, and was about to search the remainder of the apartment, when, to her horror, she heard a footstep enter the narrow passage that divided the two rooms, and approach the one which she occupied. It was useless to extinguish her light. The new-comer had already perceived her.

"Halloa!" he exclaimed, "and what pretty burglar have I here?"

She turned to confront him, and his tone changed to one of terror.

"My God! Nell!" he cried, "are you dead, or living?" She stood face to face—with Jack Portland.
CHAPTER VI.

"Are you living?" he repeated, "or—or—dead?"

In the excitement of his subsequent conversation with Lady Ilfracombe, he had forgotten the suspicions she had communicated to him, with regard to this woman, and now stood before her, dazed and trembling. Men who are given to drinking are always terribly afraid of the supernatural.

"Don't alarm yourself," replied Nell, scornfully, "I am alive."

"Alive! Then Lady Ilfracombe was correct when she assured me she had met you. Though she had never seen you before, your description tallied so exactly with the girl she saw here, that she felt certain you must be the same person."

"She was right," said Nell, quietly.

"And how did it all happen?" asked Jack Portland, eagerly. "You will forgive my curiosity, when you remember that your death was not only currently reported, but, as it was supposed, proved beyond a doubt. We, that is, Ilfracombe and all your friends, felt your loss very much. It was terrible for us to think you had come to so sad an end. You will believe so much, will you not?"

"O yes."

"But you are standing, Miss Llewellyn; pray sit down. You will not be afraid to bestow a few moments on me in order to satisfy my great curiosity. Tell me first, how is it we find you here?"

"That is easily accounted for, Mr. Portland. Usk is my native place. I was born at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn are my father and mother. So it was only natural, when I lost the home I thought was mine, that I should return to them."

"But how was it that the rumor of your death was so widely circulated?"

"O don't talk of that," she said, wearily. "I did throw
myself into the water. I thought it would be better for all concerned, myself especially; but some well-meaning people pulled me out again; and when I found that the world believed me to be gone, I thought it just as well not to undeceive it. That is all. Of course I had no idea you would ever come here or meet me again. As it is, all I wish is, that you should leave Usk without betraying my secret to my parents.”

“You may depend on me, Miss Llewellyn,” said Portland. “But does Ilfracombe know of your proximity?”

A gleam of pleasure lighted up her pale features.

“Yes, I met him yesterday, quite by accident, and he was as surprised to see me as you are. But he was glad—very glad.”

(“Hullo!” thought Jack to himself. “Then this accounts for his sudden determination to go.”) But aloud he said:

“Of course he would be, as we all are. And now, may I ask what you were doing in my room, Miss Llewellyn?”

“Yes,” she answered, boldly; “I came down here, in your absence, to see if I could find the packet of letters which you refused to give to Lady Ilfracombe.”

“The packet of letters!” he exclaimed, completely startled out of his usual prudence. “How can you know anything about her letters? Who can have told you?”

“No one has told me. My bedroom window is up there, and I overheard you talking to her to-night. I did not miss a single word of your conversation.”

“By George!” cried Portland. “Well, then, there would be no use in my disguising the matter. She has been a horrid little flirt, but there’s no harm about her now. Understand that plainly.”

“Then why did you tempt her to meet you here to-night? You must know what a rupture it would make between her and the Earl if it became known.”

“I shall take good care it does not get known. But I want to pay her out for her past conduct to me. She is the sort of lady that it is as well to keep the whip hand over.”

“When you want to make money out of her husband, Yes; I understand perfectly. So you have not let poor Ilfracombe out of your clutches yet, Mr. Portland. How much longer is he to be fleeced?”
"You speak boldly, Miss Llewellyn; but, if I remember rightly, you always used to do so."

"In his cause, yes."

"And so you meant to steal my property, eh? and restore it to her ladyship?"

"If it were possible. But I begin to be afraid you spoke the truth when you said the letters were not here. They are not in the dispatch box, at all events. O Mr. Portland, if you have them, do give them to me."

"In order that your heartless little rival—the woman who has supplanted you with Ilfracombe, may go scot-free? What do you suppose she will do for you in return—what she has already done? Persuaded her husband to leave Usk at once. 'They go to-morrow.'"

Nell drew a long breath.

"To-morrow? O that is soon. Nevertheless, let her have back her letters, Mr. Portland, if only in return for all the kindness he has shown you. You could never use them against her. It would be impossible; and, withholding them, might urge her on to confide the matter to her husband, which would mean a break-up of your long intimacy with him."

"By Jove! you're an eloquent pleader, Nell," exclaimed her companion, looking at her, admiringly; "and there's more good in your little finger than in her ladyship's whole body. You're doing this for Ilfracombe's sake, I can spot that fast enough; but if you believe all her protestations about loving him, you are easily gulled. She cares for no one but herself; she never did; but she's in a mortal fright lest I should peach, and make ructions between them, which there would be, I can assure you, when I tell you that if it were in my power, I would not marry the woman who wrote such letters as I have in my possession. By George! you should see them. They would make your eyes open. You would not have written such epistles to save your life."

"Perhaps not," she answered, quietly. "Letter writing was never much in my line. But if what you say is true, it is all the more necessary that they should be destroyed. Give them to me, Mr. Portland, I implore you, for the old times' sake."
"Do you know what you are asking, Miss Llewellyn? To be allowed to do the best turn in your power (or the power of any one) to the woman who inveigled Ilfracombe from you—to make a heartless, reckless girl, who is only afraid of imperiling her position in society, at her ease for evermore—to set her free to bamboozle some other man, as she bamboozled me."

"O no, no, I do not believe that. She loves her husband. You might hear it in the very tone of her voice."

"The very tone of her voice!" echoed Jack Portland, sneeringly. "What a judge of character you must be. Why, Nora Ilfracombe is a thorough actress, and can change her voice at will. How Ilfracombe can ever have been so infatuated as to make her his countess, beats me. And to see him lolling on the sofa by her side, and devouring her with his eyes, is sickening. He's over head and ears in love with her, and she wants to keep him at her feet. That's the long and the short of it."

"But you told her just now that it was I whom he loved!" cried Nell, quickly.

"Did I? That was only to make her ladyship waxy. Ilfracombe has forgotten all about you, long ago."

"I—I—think you are mistaken," replied Nell, in a constrained tone. "But you cannot blame the Countess for wishing to keep him as much with her as possible. And—and—since it is all over for you and me, Mr. Portland—since you have lost her, and I have lost him—would it not be better and nobler to leave them alone for the future, and put no obstacle in the way of their happiness?"

"And what would you do with the packet of letters if I did deliver them over to you?"

"I would take them to her at once, and give them her on the promise that she would never be so foolish as to meet you secretly again."

"And you think she would thank you—that she would be grateful?"

"He would, if he knew it," she replied.

"Ah! it's all for him still, though he cast you off, like a worn-out glove. You women are inexplicable creatures. It seems to me that the worse you are treated, the closer you stick."
"Never mind that. Will you give me the letters?"
"I will, on one condition."
"What is it?"
"Nell, do you remember what I said to you once in Grosvenor Square, and you were so angry with me for saying? I knew then that Ilfracombe was contemplating marriage, and that you would be left without a home, and I loved you. Yes, you may stare as much as you like, but it is the truth. Such love as it is in my nature to feel, I have felt, and do feel for you. I admire you—not only personally, but your courage; your pride; your determination. I admire the ease with which you accepted your equivocal position under Ilfracombe's roof—the humility with which you deferred to his will, even when it came to leaving you alone in London for four months, whilst he gallivanted after Miss Nora Abinger."

"O spare me, Mr. Portland, spare me!" cried Nell. "Let the past alone; it is too painful a recollection to me. I know I was furious with you. I had a right to be, but my high spirits are all gone. If it were not so, I should not stay to listen now."

"But I am not going to say one word that the most virtuous matron in England might not hear. I repeat that you are the only woman for whom I have ever experienced any genuine feeling, and if you really want to save your late friend from a very painful humiliation (which will inevitably come some day by the exhibition of these letters), I will give them to you to do with as you will—if you will marry me."

"What?" she exclaimed, starting backward.

"I mean what I say. I know that my former proposal was a different one, but I have altered my mind since then. I offer to marry you—to give you my name, which is, at all events, that of a gentleman, though, I'm afraid, a rather shady one, and—Lady Ilfracombe's letters."

"But, Mr. Portland, you do not know what you are asking. My heart is not the least changed since those days. Ilfracombe's conduct—his marriage—have made no difference to me. I wish they had. I wish I had got over my trouble and could go to you or any man with a clear conscience and say, 'I love you.' But I cannot. I never shall.
My soul is bound up in that of Ilfracombe. He is my husband—not that woman's. I think of him every day—pray for him every night—by that name. I know he has deserted me, but I have never deserted him, and there were reasons in his case that made marriage a necessity. It has not destroyed his love for me; that is as true and strong as ever, and it would be impossible to me, whilst his love lasts, to be any other man's wife.”

“Who told you that Ilfracombe loves you still—that is, if he ever loved you? ”

“He told me so himself, only last night, when we met in the meadow. He said he wished he had married me when he felt disposed to do it, years ago.”

“If he said that, he's a scoundrel and a liar!” cried Jack Portland.

“Mr. Portland, how dare you speak so? No one shall call Lord Ilfracombe such names in my presence. He was never dishonest or untrue. He was always the best and kindest and most generous of men to me—just as you heard his wife say this evening—and whoever speaks against him must be my enemy.”

“I am not that,” replied Jack Portland. “Now, look here, Miss Llewellyn. The facts are these: Ilfracombe, whatever he may have said to you, is simply infatuated with his wife. He defers to her will—follows her about like a lamb, with a blue ribbon round its neck—and obeys her in everything. No one who sees him, can help observing how madly in love he is. That is my hold over her. Ilfracombe loses a great deal of money to me. I don't deny it. His money is useful to me, and it is in my power to ruin him if I choose. Indeed, I have done a little that way already. Two years ago, in Malta, I met his wife, then Nora Abinger, and had a pretty hot flirtation with her. There was no real harm in it, but there was not much bloom left on the plum for the next comer, and she compromised herself in so many ways, that no prejudiced person would think our acquaintanceship had been an innocent one. A case of circumstantial evidence, certainly; but so are most cases that end fatally for the actors in them. Well, to speak plainly, this is how I stand with the Earl and Countess. I could ruin them both to-morrow if
I chose; and it is for you to render me harmless—draw the
dragon's teeth, in fact, and transform him into a lamb."

Nell had grown very white as Portland alluded to Ilfracombe's affection for his wife, but still she shook her head and repeated:

"I couldn't—indeed, I couldn't!"

"When I spoke to you last," persisted Portland, "things were quite different. Then, you expected your lover to return to you any day, and you were horrified at the idea of stepping from one equivocal position to another. Now all is changed. Ilfracombe will never live with you again. You are sure of that. He has left you unprotected, and thrown back upon a life for which he unfitted you, without any prospects for the future—a ruined woman, yet, with all the instincts of a lady. And I offer you marriage—an honest position, if nothing else, and a return to some of the luxuries of life to which you have so long been accustomed. Is it not worth thinking over?"

Nell looked at Jack Portland steadily. She had always hated and despised him, and never more so than at the present moment—but he held the fate of Ilfracombe in his hands. He could ruin his fortune, and destroy his domestic happiness—and he put it in her power to save him. What if she could do it? Would it be a greater sacrifice than flinging herself in the water had been? Could it be a crueler fate than that which she endured now? Could anything—even marriage with Jack Portland, prove more bitter than her present existence, and the bare outlook for the future?

"What security would you give me—in case of my complying with your proposal—that my sacrifice would not be wasted, that you would not continue to lead Ilfracombe into extravagant and folly, until you had ruined him?"

"Your best security would lie in the possession of her ladyship's letters," was the reply. "She has such a wholesome dread of my producing them at present, that she dares not influence her husband to give up my acquaintance. But Madame Nora hates me too genuinely to delay setting her own machinery in motion, one minute after she knows she has no more to fear from me. Set your mind at ease on that score, Miss Llewellyn. The whole matter
lies in a nutshell—my possession of those letters. They are the locks of Sampson—the heel of Achilles. Once take them out of my hands, and I am powerless to harm—my vulnerable spot is found."

"Tell me all your conditions," continued Nell, in a low voice.

Jack Portland's eyes glistened, as he exclaimed, eagerly: "They shall not be difficult ones, my dear. If you will consent to come with me, and be married at the registrar's office, the letters are yours."

"No, no, I will not trust you, Mr. Portland. I must have the letters first."

"I have greater faith than you have. I believe I can trust you. You are too noble a woman to deceive me."

"If I say I will marry you, I will marry you. You may rely on that. My worst enemies never called me a liar. But I promise nothing more."

"I ask for nothing more," replied Mr. Portland. "Come, I will make a bargain with you, Nell. I will ride into Newport tomorrow morning, and get the license. We must give them twenty-four hours' notice, and the next day we will be married, and, as soon as the ceremony is over, the letters shall be placed in your hand. Will that satisfy you?"

"No. I must be allowed to examine them first, to make sure they are the original ones; and I must have your attestation in writing, that you have never received any others from Miss Abinger, and that if, at any time, such should crop up, they will be forgeries. Else, how can I be sure that it—it—might not all be in vain?"

"You know how to drive a hard bargain, Nell, but I agree. Give me yourself, and I am willing to give up everything on earth in exchange. So it is a bargain, then. To-morrow (or, rather to-day, for the dawn is breaking) is Thursday, and to-morrow, Friday, will be our wedding-day."

"An unlucky day," said Nell, with a slight shiver. "But I have not promised yet. You must give me till this afternoon to think it over, Mr. Portland. It has been too hurried a proposal."

"O come, I say, that's too bad. You've as good as said
you'd consent. I'm in down-right earnest, Nell, 'pon my soul, I am; and, as far as in me lies, I'll make you a good husband. Now, don't be afraid. I know you never had a great opinion of me, but I'm going to reform now, on my word, I am, and turn over a new leaf, if you'll only help me. Come, now, say it's a settled thing."

"Not till this afternoon," she reiterated. "Be here at two o'clock, and I will give you my final answer then. But only under the conditions I have named. I must have the letters beforehand to examine, and the assurance that you have kept none of them back, and then you shall deliver them to me in the registrar's office. On no other terms will I meet you there."

"All right; I agree to them. But now you had better go, or Lennox may come rushing in. Good-night. Are you not going to kiss me before you leave?"

Nell shook her head.

"There will be time for that afterwards," she said, gravely; "and don't forget, Mr. Portland, that I have held back nothing from you to-night, and that I come to you with no disguise. You have seen into my heart. If you elect to buy an empty casket, don't blame the seller."

"I shall blame no one and nothing," he replied. "I am only too pleased to get you on any terms. I see you do not believe me when I say I love you, and have loved you, all along. You think such a word from my lips a sacrilege; but still it is true, and I shall try to make you love me in return. I am a wild, reckless, perhaps dishonorable fellow; but I have one soft spot in my heart, and that is for you. I shall be here, without fail, at two o'clock this afternoon. Mind you, have your answer ready. And mark you, Nell," he continued, rather fiercely, "if it is 'no,' the fate of the Ilfracombes is sealed. I shall not be able to bear the disappointment. I shall lay it at his door, and I will take my revenge without delay. You understand?"

"Yes, perfectly. And I think my answer will not be 'no.'"

She passed away through the narrow passage as she spoke, and Jack Portland stood and watched her disappear, with a new feeling in his heart.

As for Nell, when she had reached the sanctuary of her own room, her thoughts were not of this extraordinary en-
agement to marry—so suddenly and unexpectedly entered into—and with all men in the world, Jack Portland—she did not think of the sacrifice she was about to make, and for her rival, Lady Ilfracombe. No. Her whole mind was bent on solving one question, the only thing which affected her in the whole transaction—did Lord Ilfracombe really love his wife, as Mr. Portland said he did? What incomprehensible animals women are. She loved this man with her whole soul. She desired his happiness and welfare above all earthly things. She had been ready to throw her life away when she heard he had deserted her. She was ready now, for his sake, and to save the honor of his name, to take upon herself a marriage, the very thought of which she loathed and abhorred—but she could not bear the idea that he was happier in his love for his wife than he had been with her; that he had forgotten, in fact, the days which they had spent together, or was glad that they were gone. Her inward cry still was: "Tell me you love me best, of all the world, and the other woman can have your title and your money."

To hear Jack Portland expatiating on the Earl's infatuation for his Countess had been the bitterest thing Nell had yet been called upon to bear—the motive which had made her consent, against her will, to become his wife. But, yet, she did not quite believe it. She recalled Ilfracombe's affectionate words of the evening before—his pleasure at meeting her again—his regret that he had not done the right thing by her years before—and was resolved to know the truth for herself before she finally sealed her fate by consenting to Mr. Portland's proposal. As she cogitated thus, all in a cold tremble and flutter, Nell came to the desperate resolve to seek an interview with the Earl and tell him of this proposal and ask his advice whether she should marry or not. Then she should see, she said to herself, by his look, his manner, his sorrow or his joy, if he loved her still. But he would not let her marry, Nell felt certain of that, and smiled as she thought of it. But, then, the letters—these fatal letters—what would become of him and the Countess if she declined? She sat by the window until it was time to dress herself anew, without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.
CHAPTER VII.

When she descended to the parlor, her father and mother were already seated at the breakfast table. To her courteous "good-morning," they vouchsafed no reply. They were evidently still displeased with her for her rebellion of the night before. Nell went up to the farmer's side and laid her hand on his.

"Father," she said, in a trembling voice, "I have been thinking over what you asked me yesterday, and I am willing to do as you say. I will go to Lord Ilfracombe and ask him to intercede with Sir Archibald Bowmant about the raising of your rent."

This avowal changed the manner of both the old people at once.

"That's my good lass!" exclaimed her mother. "I knew you wouldn't hold out against father and me for long."

"Well done, Nell!" replied Mr. Llewellyn; "and you'll succeed, my girl, for it's few men, be they lords or plough-boys, that would like to refuse anything to a face like yours."

"Lor! father, don't go puffing the maid up on her good looks," cried his wife; "'handsome is as handsome does,' that's my motto. But I don't think his lordship will refuse her, all the same, for he was rare generous to her whilst she was in service. Ah, Nell, 'twas the foolishest thing as you ever did to chuck up that place. You might find out, whilst you're about it, if there should happen to be a vacancy in her ladyship's house now."

"All right, mother," said Nell, gently; and then, drawing a letter from her pocket, she continued: "I wrote this note to Lord Ilfracombe last night, father, and if you approve it, you might send it over to the Hall by Tom."

She unfolded the paper and read:

"My Lord: My father wishes that I should speak to you on a matter, important to himself. If it should be
quite convenient, will your lordship send word by the bearer at what hour this morning I could have a few minutes' conversation with you?

"Yours respectfully,

"E. Llewellyn."

"A very proper note," said her mother, approvingly.

"Ay! and don't our Nell write a neat hand?" put in the farmer. "You're a rare scholar, Nell, though I don't know where you got it; for Hetty, who had the same advantages, can't do more than manage a few words, and them not legible. It'll do, rarely, my lass, and is just the thing I wanted. His lordship can't refuse so simple a request. I'll send Tom over with it at once." And he rose from table for the purpose.

"Come, now, my girl, sit down, do, and eat your breakfast," quoth Mrs. Llewellyn, seeing that her daughter still lingered by the window.

"No, thank you, mother. I don't feel like eating this morning. I wrote the letter because I don't like to cross father, but I've a faint heart about it. The Earl may not like to be worried, now he's out for a holiday, and I'd be loath to make him angry."

"Nonsense, Nell! He must be a cranky fellow if a little note like yours would put him out. He can't but say 'No,' lass, and then there'll be no harm done. But if you hadn't writ it, father would likely have always thought you might have saved the rent if you'd had a mind to, so it's just as well to humor him. Come, take your tea, or I'll be angry."

The girl drank the cup of tea which her mother handed her, and took up her station again by the window.

If he should be angry, she thought, or if he should be engaged and unable to see her, how could she face the other without knowing the worst, or the best? And if the best—what then? Her life seemed to have become a tangled coil which she had no power of unraveling. In about half an hour she saw the hedger, Tom, shambling down the dell, with a white envelope in his hands. She rushed forward feverishly to intercept him. It was stamped with the Earl's coronet. Nell tore it open and devoured its contents.
“My Dear Miss Llewellyn: If you will be in Mrs. Hody’s sitting-room at eleven o’clock, I will come to you there for a few minutes. Yours faithfully,

“ILFRACOMBE.”

He would see her, then; she would see him. All, for the moment, seemed bright again.

Her parents were delighted with the news.

“There, now, what did I tell ye?” said Mr. Llewellyn. “I knew no gentleman, let alone a lord, would refuse to see a servant as had done her duty by him. You’ve done the job now, Nell, as sure as a gun. The Earl will persuade Sir Archibald to lower the rent again, and mother and me will feel we owe it all to you. Give me a buss, lass. It’s summat for a man to have such a handsome daughter to boast of. They may say as beauty is deceitful, but it beats brains any day. You’ve saved the old farm to us, my girl, and I’m thankful to you for it.”

“I’ll do my best, dear father,” said Nell, “but you mustn’t make too sure. The Earl, with all the good will in the world, may not have the power; but I’m sure he’ll try to get it done.”

“And when did you ever hear of a lord trying for anything that didn’t succeed?” exclaimed her mother. “It isn’t as if he was a nobody. But come, my lass, you mustn’t go up to the Hall in that soiled dress. You’ve a clean print in your drawers, so go and put it on, and make your hair tidy. It looks as if you’d been up all night.”

And the old woman bundled her daughter up-stairs to look after her wardrobe.

“Now, where did you put that nasty poison?” she asked, as they entered the bedroom together.

“Where you told me, mother; on the top of the wardrobe,” answered Nell.

“Have you written a label for it yet?”

“No; I forgot to do so.”

“Well, don’t you put it off another day,” replied Mrs. Llewellyn, “for father was quite vexed with me for letting the bottle go out of my hands. He says a wineglassful of that stuff would kill the strongest man in Monmouth.”

“No one can get at it there,” said Nell, quietly.
That's all right, then; but I shouldn't like for there to be an accident with it. Here, Nell, tie this blue silk handkerchief round your throat. You always look so nice in blue, I think."

Nell assented passively to all her mother's propositions; and, putting a straw hat on her head, walked slowly up the meadow, and through the pine plantation to the private apartments of the housekeeper at the Hall.

"Well, Nell," said Mrs. Hody, when she arrived there, "and so you've come to have a private audience of his lordship. He came to tell me he would see you here at eleven o'clock; but, as it was a private matter, he did not wish to have it discussed in the dining-room, so I was to send him word quietly, when you arrived. And what can you have to say to the Earl, I wonder, as all the world can't hear?"

"I asked to speak to Lord Ilfracombe on some business connected with my father, Mrs. Hody," replied Nell, blushing. "He was my former master, you know, or father would have come himself. But he thought his lordship would rather see me."

"Ah! well, I suppose it's all right," responded the virtuous housekeeper; "but I should have thought the study or the gun-room would have been a fitter place. However, now you're here, please to sit down, and I'll go and tell his lordship as you're come. You may have to wait a bit, I'm not sure as they've finished breakfast; but he'll be here, I suppose, before long. Bless me! but you do look dazed, Nell Llewellyn. That fever has run you down terrible. Will you have a glass of wine before I go?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Hody," replied the girl, as she sat down in a chair, and leaned her aching head against the wall.

Mrs. Hody bustled out of the room, and it seemed ages to Nell before any one came to join her. She heard voices and laughter proceeding from the garden, and many other sounds indicative of life and enjoyment, but all about the housekeeper's domains the intensest quiet seemed to reign. At last it was broken by the sound of a light, quick footstep, coming along the stone passage, which made Nell's heart leap within her bosom, and, in another moment, the door opened and closed, and Lord Ilfracombe stood before her. Nell struggled to her feet to meet him.
“O Vernie!” were her first words. “It is not my fault.”

“Hus—h!” said the Earl, as he opened the door again, and listened to hear if, by any chance, they could be overheard. “You mustn’t call me by that name, Nell, lest any of the servants should have a mind for eaves-dropping.”

It was a small thing and a very natural thing for him to say, but it fell on the girl’s excited spirits like a cold douche.

“I forgot. Forgive me,” she recommenced. “It was not my fault (I was going to say) that you received that note—my Lord. I would not have sent it to the Hall on any account; but my father fancied I might have some influence with you in a certain matter, and insisted on my asking to see you.”

“It is all right,” he said, kindly; “only we must keep to the business—you understand.”

“O yes,” she answered with a catch in her breath, “and it is soon told. My father has been a tenant of Sir Archibald’s for many years—twenty-five, I think, or more. He has lived at Panty-cuckoo Farm all his married life, and both I and my sister were born there. Father has done a great deal for the land and spent a lot of money on it; but Sir Archibald Bowmant keeps raising the rent until he fears it will be impossible for him to keep it on. And he thought, perhaps—father thought that—you might be able to help him by your influence with Sir Archibald.”

“But I don’t quite understand,” said the Earl. “What is it Mr. Llewellyn wants me to do, Nell?”

“He fancied you might be able to remonstrate with Sir Archibald, because it is so unfair.”

Lord Ilfracombe looked grave.

“I am sorry to refuse any request of your father’s, but I really don’t see my way to it. I am not a friend of Sir Archibald’s, you see. I am quite a new acquaintance, and I know nothing of his monetary affairs. I am afraid he would resent any interference on my part as a liberty.”

“I told father so,” replied Nell, whose eyes were fixed on the Earl all the time. “I thought just the same myself, but he was so obstinate I did not know how to refuse him without—raising his suspicions.”

“Ah!” replied Ilfracombe, thoughtfully. “Now, don’t
you see the imprudence of refusing to accept any settlement at my hands, Nell? You might have helped your father in this emergency."

"Not with your money, Lord Ilfracombe, given in such a cause. You don't know my father. He would have died sooner than have taken it."

"Like his daughter," said the Earl. "Well, you don't know how unhappy you have made me by refusing all assistance at my hands; and since I met you the other evening and learned that you were alive, you have occupied all my thoughts, Nell. I will tell you what I will do, if possible. I will ask Sir Archibald Bowmant if he will sell me Panty-cuckoo Farm; and if he will part with the property, and I become your father's landlord, he need not fear my raising the rent to him. I should feel much more inclined to lower it. And then, some day, Nell, when you marry, as I have done, you will let me settle the old farm on you as a wedding present, and set my poor conscience at rest for evermore, won't you?"

Nell set her teeth hard together, as she replied:

"Would you like to see me married? Would it make you happier?"

There was not much need for him to reply. The light that illumined his whole face at the idea was sufficient answer.

"Is there any chance of it?" he asked, eagerly.

"There is an excellent chance if I choose to accept it. A man—a gentleman—who knows the circumstances of my life, and so cannot say afterwards that I have deceived him, has made me an offer of marriage, though I have not yet definitely accepted him."

"And do you like him, Nell? Will he be kind to you?" said Ilfracombe.

He would have liked to see her respectably married; for, whilst she lived as she was doing now, she was a constant reproach to him; but, like all his sex, though unwilling to accept the responsibility himself, he did not quite like the idea of any other man possessing what had been his. But he stamped down the feeling. It would decidedly be for the best, he said to himself.

"Does he love you? Would he be good to you?" he repeated, anxiously.
"He says he loves me," she answered, slowly; "and I shall take good care he is not unkind to me."

"A man would be a brute who could be unkind to you," said the Earl, with deep feeling in his voice. "Nell, I think that your illness has made you more beautiful than ever. It has refined your whole appearance. But this man—I am glad he is a gentleman. You are not fit to be the wife of a clown, and you can hold your own with any lady in the land."

"So you advise me to marry him," she said, raising her large, liquid eyes to his face. Ilfracombe remembered afterwards how much they looked like the eyes of a dumb animal that regard you patiently, never mind what pain you may be putting it to; but, at the time, he only saw their pathetic beauty.

"My dear girl," he replied, drawing nearer to her, and taking her hand in his; "how can I do otherwise than advise you to accept this proposal; that is, if the fellow has enough to keep you in a decent position of life. It is hard for a woman to fight the world alone, Nell. You are very beautiful, and the world will look kindly on you whilst you remain so; but beauty does not last forever, and when the evil days of old age, and perhaps penury come, it is well for a woman, if she is an honored and respected wife. You know I must feel very deeply on this subject, for the reason that I, in my reckless thoughtlessness, have done so much to mar your prospects of making a good marriage; but if I find that, spite of all, you do marry well, I shall be a very grateful, and a very happy man."

"If I knew that you would have no regrets," said Nell, with white, parched lips; "if I were sure that you loved your wife, and she loved you——"

"O if that assurance will make your task easier, my poor Nell, let me give it you," cried Ilfracombe; "and, indeed, I am sure it is better in any case, since everything between we two is over, that we should understand each other perfectly on that point. I do love my wife with all my heart, and I hope—nay, I believe she loves me almost as well. You could hardly suppose that I should have married her, else—under the circumstances. She had no money—no particular birth, and no particular
good looks. What should I have married her for, except for love? But she took me completely by storm the first time I met her, and I have been at her feet ever since. So you need have no scruples on that score. And I believe, Nell—indeed, I feel sure, that if you were married, and especially to a gentleman, Nora would prove a true friend to you. She is a warm-hearted girl, without any affectation about her, and I told her the history of our acquaintance, and she was genuinely sorry for your fate. You need fear nothing from Nora. She will be as glad to hear you are happily married as I shall be."

"That is enough," said Nell, in a low voice. "That settles the matter, my Lord; but I thought I should like to hear you say so with your own lips, first. The next thing you will hear will be of my marriage."

"But when is it to be, Nell, and what is the happy man's name?" asked the Earl, in quite a new voice, it was so merry, and buoyant, and relieved.

"O you will know all that in good time," replied the girl, trying to imitate his cheerfulness. "It is not quite a settled thing yet, but it will be soon, now."

"And you will not refuse to take a wedding present from me, Nell, for the old times' sake, will you?" said Ilfracombe, insinuatingly. "Perhaps it may be Pantycuckoo Farm, who knows? if Sir Archibald consents to part with it, and then you will become your father's landlord. Wouldn't that be funny? How surprised the old people would be, when you showed them the title-deeds. And you will let me have the very first intimation of the event, won't you?"

"I will, my Lord," said Nell, in a dull, constrained tone.

"No, no, Nellie, not that. I was only obliged to caution you just now, because the servants are so beastly curious in this house. But we are quite alone, and you must call me 'Vernie' again, just once more, and kiss me as you used to do in the old days."

She turned, and caught him passionately to her breast, and murmured in his ear: "Vernie, Vernie, God bless you forever."

"God bless you, Nell!" he responded, as he kissed her heartily in return.
"I am going now," she said, presently, with trembling lips, "and we may not meet again—not just yet. You offered to do great things for me, Vernie, but I would rather you were a friend to my old father. If—if—anything should happen to me, will you be kind to him for my sake? Give him a little help if he should need it, dear, or become his landlord, if possible, which would please me better than anything."

"I will be his friend, and yours, Nell, to my life's end," replied Ilfracombe; "and if I cannot purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, and matters grow worse here, he shall have one of my own farms in Huntingdonshire, and be comfortable for the rest of his days. But why do you say, 'if anything should happen to you'? What should happen, my dear? You are getting well and strong, and shall live to a hundred years with your good man."

"Do you think so?" replied the girl, with a sad smile.
"Well, if I do, my parents shall owe their comfort to no other hand than mine, and if I don't—you will not forget your promise to me."

And before he could say another word to her, she had gone. The two old people were awaiting her return with the greatest anxiety, and exuberant were their rejoicings when they heard the news she had to tell. The Earl had not only promised to try and purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, but had said that, in the event of his failure, he would transplant them all to one of his own farms in Huntingdonshire.

"Aye," exclaimed the old man, "though it'll be a sore wrench to leave Panty-cuckoo Farm, 'twill be a fine thing to live under his lordship's tenancy. Sir Archibald—he's only an upstart, when all's said and done. His father was the first baronet, and it takes centuries to make 'em know their places. He wouldn't never have thought of sweating the tenantry for to pay his own rates and taxes, if he'd been a thoroughbred 'un; but I suppose he knows no better. But the Earl Ilfracombe—why, of course, he knows how to treat those that work to make the prosperity of the country. He's a real aristocrat, born and bred, and wouldn't demean himself to raise a man's rent to pay for his own extravagances. Whatever we might feel at leaving the old
farm, lass, I don’t know if we wouldn’t be wiser to take his lordship’s offer at once and transplant all our goods and chattels to Huntingdonshire.”

“But you mustn’t do anything in a hurry, father!” exclaimed his wife, alarmed by the rapidity of her good man’s ideas; “you must wait till we have word from his lordship. But it’s a fine thing you thought of, sending our Nell over to the Hall to speak with him. It’s made our fortunes. We shall all be the better for it, sha’n’t us, my lass?”

“Yes, all,” replied her daughter, in a dull tone, as if she were dreaming.

“Now, I declare, girl, if you haven’t got one of your muddly fits on again,” said Mrs. Llewellyn. “If you spoke to his lordship in that sort of way, I wonder he ever listened to you. He must have thought you were half asleep. It all comes of your taking no breakfast. Who ever heard of a healthy young woman beginning the day on an empty stomach? It’s absurd to think of such a thing.”

Nell went up to her mother and kissed her wrinkled forehead.

“Never mind, mother,” she said, gently; “don’t grumble at me to-day, for I don’t feel as if I could bear it. You shall think better of me to-morrow, I promise you.”

And so she left the farmer and his wife to congratulate each other on the possession of so handsome a daughter, that no one could find it in their hearts to refuse her anything.

And Nell sat in her own room, thinking—thinking. It was nearing the hour when she had promised to give Mr. Portland her answer. He had agreed to come to that place for it, and stand under her window till she appeared to give it him. He was more eager for it than one would have given him credit for. He had lain awake the night before, wondering if Nell had really meant what she said, and what his life would feel like when she brought her gracious presence into it. He could jest and be sarcastic with her, when he saw no likelihood of her consenting to marry him; but now that she had half consented, his feelings seemed already to have become somewhat purified by the very possibility of such a thing. Perhaps those few hours of anticipation formed the best part of Jack Portland’s existence—the
least like the years that had gone before it. He felt humbled as he looked back upon the past—fearful as he contemplated the future. For the first time, he knew himself to be utterly unworthy of the regard or the possession of a good woman. And as he stood beneath Nell Llewellyn’s window, he felt certain that she would tell him she could not consent to such a step. Fancy his relief and pleasure when she looked for a moment from the casement and said:

“Mr. Portland, I have made up my mind, and it is to be.”
CHAPTER VIII.

The license having been procured, the marriage ceremony before the registrar of Usk was accomplished in a very few minutes. Jack Portland had only to meet Nell at the office the following morning, and, in half an hour, they walked out again, man and wife. The girl was very calm and collected over the whole affair—so calm, indeed, that her new-made husband looked at her with surprise. They walked back to their respective destinations by a bye path, so that they might converse unseen, though nobody in Usk would have been very much astonished if they had encountered one of the gentlemen from the Hall, taking a stroll with such a notorious beauty as Farmer Llewellyn's daughter.

"Well, Nell," commenced Jack Portland, "so it really is un fait accompli, and you are Mrs. Portland. Have you told the old people yet?"

"No. I waited until, as you say, it should be an accomplished thing."

"When shall you break the news to them? Won't they be very much surprised? How will they take it, do you think?"

"O they will only feel too honored at my having made such a good match—at my having married a 'real gentleman,'" replied Nell, with quiet sarcasm. "What else should farmers feel?"

"You'll have to tell them before you join me at 'The Three Pilchards' this evening."

"Perhaps. It depends on what humor they may be in. At all events, you can announce the fact to them to-morrow morning."

"What a funny girl you are, to want to run away from home in so secret a manner. Is it because of Ilfracombe's vicinity? Are you afraid he will be jealous? It would be very unjust if he were. A regular dog in the manger sort of business."

"No; you are quite mistaken. I am afraid of no one,
and nothing. I am my own mistress, and free to do as I choose. It is my fad to have things as I say. But let us sit down here for a minute, whilst we decide exactly what we intend to do."

She took a seat upon a grassy bank as she spoke, and drew a packet of letters from her pocket. Jack Portland sat down beside her, and regarded them ruefully.

"There go all my hopes of making any more money out of that muff, Ilfracombe. Nell, you ought to think I value you very highly, to have struck such a bargain with you as I have."

"Do you think so?" she rejoined. "Well, I prophesy, Mr. Portland, that a day will come when you will look back and bless me for having had the courage to buy these letters from you, at whatever cost—a day when you will regard the life you have led hitherto with loathing and abhorrence, and scorn to do a dishonorable act. A day when you will thank heaven that you are an honest man, and live by honest work alone."

"I am afraid that day is in the clouds, Nell; that is, if you call play dishonest, for I should never live to see it, without."

"I am not so sure of that. There must be something better in your nature than you have discovered yet, or you would not have offered to make a ruined woman, like myself, your wife."

"Let us hope there is, for your sake. Now, as for our plans."

"These are foolish Lady Ilfracombe's letters," said Nell, handling the packet, "and here is your affirmation that there are no more in your possession. Did you make the appointment with her in the meadow for this afternoon at five o'clock."

"Yes. I wrote her a note to say I had received the packet from London, and would deliver it to her, without fail, at that hour."

"She has good reason to doubt the truth of your promise; but to see you in the meadow will not be compromising; so she will keep the appointment, and I shall be there to meet her. You will not expect to see me at the 'Three Pilchards' before nine."
“Can’t you come earlier?”
“Not without exciting the suspicions of my parents, and making my mother resolve to sit up to let me in again. It will be better as I say. At nine o’clock, or a little after, I shall be there. I hope the registrar will not blab the news of our marriage through Usk before that time.”
“I think not. I pledged him to secrecy with a golden tip. But to-morrow every one must know it, both at Usk Hall and Panty-cuckoo Farm.”
“O yes, certainly. To-morrow every one must know it,” replied Nell, in the same impassive tone; “and now we had better think of going back, Mr. Portland.”
“Not ‘Mr. Portland,’ now, Nell, surely,” said her companion. “You must call me ‘Jack.’”
“Jack,” repeated the girl, as if she were saying a lesson.
They rose together, as she spoke, and proceeded towards the Hall. When they reached the farm gates, Nell slipped from him without any further farewell, and entered her father’s house. Jack Portland looked after her, a little wistfully. He had married her, certainly, but had he gained her? Had she done it only to save Lord Ilfracombe from further disgrace and ruin—to save his Countess’ reputation for the sake of his hitherto unblemished name? He was not quite sure, but he had a shrewd suspicion of the truth; and as Mr. Portland turned away, he sighed.
Lady Ilfracombe was in high spirits at luncheon that afternoon. Jack had actually compromised himself to the degree of writing to assure her she should receive back her letters; and, for the first time, perhaps, she really believed him. Her eyes were dancing and her cheeks were flushed with expectation. When her husband asked her how she intended to spend the afternoon, she actually laughed across the table at Mr. Portland, as she replied that she had promised to take a stroll with his friend.
“Old Jack and you going botanizing together!” exclaimed Ilfracombe; “that is a good joke. Well, I was going to ask him to ride over to Ponty-pool with me, but I suppose your sex gives you the prior claim.”
“I should rather think so,” said the Countess; “at least, if Mr. Portland deserts me, it will be the last time I ever make an appointment with him, so mind that, Mr. Portland.”
“Don’t alarm yourself, Lady Ilfracombe,” replied Jack Portland, who also appeared to be in unusually good spirits that afternoon; “my word is my bond. Besides, as you leave Usk so soon, it may be my last opportunity of enjoying a tête-à-tête with her ladyship for some time to come. Is the date of your departure definitely fixed?”

“Definitely,” replied the Earl. “We start en route for Wiesbaden by the three o’clock train to-morrow afternoon. We don’t expect to be on the Continent more than a few weeks, Jack; and when we return to Thistlemere, for the shooting, you must join us, as usual.”

Mr. Portland looked important.

“Well, I’m not quite sure of that, old chap. It’s awfully good of you to ask me, but we will talk of it afterwards. If you don’t start till three, to-morrow, I expect I shall have some news to tell you before you go.”

“News!” cried Lady Ilfracombe. “O Mr. Portland! what is it? Do tell us at once. What is it about? Anything to do with us, or does it only concern yourself? Is it good news or bad? Now, don’t keep us in this terrible suspense.”

“How like a woman!” exclaimed Mr. Portland. “How much would you leave for to-morrow at this rate? No, Lady Ilfracombe, my news must really wait. It will come on you as a great surprise, but I hope it won’t be a disagreeable one. Now, there is food for your curiosity to feed on for the rest of this afternoon. Grand news, remember, and something you have never dreamt of before—the most incredible thing you could conceive.”

“You’re going to be married!” cried Nora, with feminine audacity, which set the whole table in a roar.

“Well, you have drawn on your imagination, Lady Ilfracombe, this time,” said Sir Archibald. “Mr. Portland married! I should as soon think of my kestrel hawk going in for the domesticities.”

“Jack married!” laughed the Earl. “Come, you have, indeed, thought of the most incredible thing you could conceive. We shall have you writing a novel after this, Nora. You have evidently a gift for imagining the infinitely impossible.”

“There must be something very ridiculous about me, I
fear," said Mr. Portland, "that every one thinks it such a far-fetched idea that I should settle down."

"You settle down, old man!" replied Ilfracombe. "Yes, when you're carried to your grave, not before. However, let us change so unprofitable a subject. You are booked, then, Nora, for the day, so, perhaps, Lady Bowmant will permit me to be her cavalier."

"With pleasure, Lord Ilfracombe. I shall be delighted to get you to myself for a little, since you are going to be cruel enough to desert us so soon."

They all rose, laughing, from table after that and dispersed to their separate apartments.

It was pleasant and cool when Nora strolled out to the meadow to meet Jack Portland. Her thoughts were pleasant, too. On the next day she was going to take her husband far away from the temptation of Mr. Portland's society, and she hoped, before they met him again, to have persuaded Ilfracombe to give up play altogether. These abominable letters would be destroyed by that time. She was determined that she would burn them to ashes as soon as ever she got them in her hands, and then the coast would be clear before her and Ilfracombe for the rest of their married life. She hummed the air of a popular ditty to herself as she walked through the rich, thick grass, expecting to see Mr. Portland every moment coming to meet her with the longed-for packet in his hands.

Instead of which, a young woman, plainly attired, came up to her and said:

"I beg your pardon, Lady Ilfracombe, but are you waiting for Mr. Portland?"

Nora turned round, exclaiming, angrily: "And what business is that of yours?" when she recognized the speaker. "O Miss Llewellyn, is that you? I—I—did not know you at first. Yes, I am waiting for Mr. Portland, though I cannot think how you came to know it."

"Because he told me so himself, and commissioned me to deliver this packet to you."

Lady Ilfracombe grew very red as she took the letters.

"He commissioned you to give them to me? It is very strange. I do not understand. He said he should be here himself. What on earth made him give this packet to you?"
"Because I insisted on it; he could not help himself," replied Nell. "Lady Ilfracombe, do not be angry with me for mentioning it; but my bedroom at the farm-house is over that occupied by Mr. Portland, and I was at my window the night you visited him there, and heard all that passed between you about those letters."

"That was eaves-dropping," exclaimed the Countess, with crimson cheeks, "and you had no right to do it. If you made use of what you overheard, you would ruin me with my husband."

"Do you think me capable of such a thing? I should not have listened to a single word, unless I had thought I could do you a service by doing so. As soon as I understood the dilemma you were in, and why you had sought that man, I resolved, if possible, to get the letters he was so meanly withholding from you."

"You resolved?" cried Nora, in surprise.

"Yes; and as soon as you and he had left to return to the Hall, I went down to his room and ransacked it in order to find them. I had not done so, when Mr. Portland came back and found me there—after which there was an explanation between us, and I forced him to give them up to me—with a written affirmation that he has no more in his possession."

"And he assured me that he had telegraphed to London for them, and only received them this morning."

"If he said so, you might have been sure it was untrue."

"Miss Llewellyn, you don't like Jack Portland any more than I do," said Nora, looking straight in the other's face. "I have no reason to do so, Lady Ilfracombe."

"And you actually did this for me?—how good and sweet of you it was! I have not been used to receive such favors from my own sex. But why did you do it? What am I to you?"

"You are his wife," answered Nell, in a low voice, "and he loves you. Lady Ilfracombe, I believe you know who I am?"

"Yes, I think I do," said Nora, with a little confusion; "I guessed it. I recognized you when we first met from your description. You—you—are Nell Llewellyn, are you not—who—who—"
“Don’t be afraid of wounding me by saying it,” replied Nell, gently; “and don’t shrink from me, for I shall never intrude on your presence again.”

At these words, so sweetly and humbly spoken, all the generosity of Lady Ilfracombe’s nature was roused at once. “Shrink from you, my dear girl, and when you have just rendered me the greatest service possible?” she exclaimed. “What a brute you must think me. Why should I? Neither you nor I is to blame, and you have been so sorely injured. We are both Ilfracombe’s wives, I suppose, in God’s sight, though I happen to bear his name. It is funny, isn’t it, that a Christian country should make such a wide difference between a few words pronounced by the law, and God’s great law of nature? But, Nell, I am sorry for you, indeed I am, and always have been.”

“I believe you,” replied Nell, “for I heard you say so that night. But I did not come here to speak with you of my own affairs, only to give these letters into your keeping, and to beg of you, as you value your reputation, and your husband’s happiness, never to have any secret dealings with Mr. Portland again.”

“Indeed, you may be sure of that. He is a pitiless scoundrel, without heart or honor. I have suffered too much at his hands to trust him again. But how did you manage to get these letters from him? That is what puzzles me. How did you bribe him, or have you got him somehow in your power?”

“It little matters,” said Nell, with a shudder of remembrance; “he cannot harm me, and I shall not suffer in consequence. But you will let me speak plainly to you, Lady Ilfracombe.”

“Say anything you like,” replied Nora, “for I can never thank you enough for what you have done for me.”

“When I lived with Lord Ilfracombe, I saw the bad influence this man had over him—how he led him into extravagance and vice, and took the occasion of their so-called friendship to rob him of his money, and make him risk his good name.”

“I have seen the same, of course,” said the Countess; “but Ilfracombe is so infatuated with Portland, that he will believe nothing against him. But now that I have these
letters, I will make my husband break with him, if I die for it."

"Yes, do, do!" cried Nell, "and, if need be, tell him everything, so that he sees him in his true colors. Save Lord Ilfracombe from further contamination, as you value his happiness and his honor."

"And what am I to do for you, dear Nell?" asked Nora, as she took the other's hand. "How can I make you happy, in return for the great happiness you have given me? Let me do something for you. Don't be proud, as you were that day at the farm, and send me away miserable. Give me an opportunity of proving my gratitude."

"Do you mean that? Do you say it in earnest?"

"Indeed, indeed I do."

"Then love him, Lady Ilfracombe; love him with all your heart and soul, and never let him cast one regretful look backwards, or blame himself for things which were beyond his control. Tell him, if ever he should speak to you of me, that I acquiesced in all his decisions, and thought them for the best—that he was right to marry, and that I thanked God he had secured a wife who loved him, and whom I heard say so with her own lips."

"You loved him very dearly, Nell?"

Nell's answer to this question was to sit down suddenly on the grass, and burst into tears, covering her poor face with her attenuated hands, and rocking herself to and fro in her speechless misery. Nora sat down beside her, and threw her arm round her waist. She remembered nothing then, but that here was—not her husband's former mistress—but another woman, as loving, and as entitled to happiness as herself, who had lost by her gain.

"Nell, Nell!" she whispered. "Poor, dear Nell! don't cry. Ilfracombe remembers and loves you still. It is a cruel fate that has made our two lots so different. O poor Nell, don't sob like that, or you will break my heart."

And the Countess put her arms round the other's neck, and kissed the tears off her cheeks. The action recalled Nell to herself.

"Thank you," she said, softly. "Thank you so much. I shall not forget that you kissed me. But don't think because I cry that I am discontented, or wish things al-
tered from what they are. I know now they are all for the best. Only love him—love him all you are able, and have no more secrets from him, and may God bless you both."

"I do love him!" exclaimed Lady Ilfracombe; "and now that you have given me back my peace of mind, I shall be able to show my love for him with a freer conscience. O it was terrible to feel his kisses, or hear his praises, and know all the time that that horrid man might carry his threats into execution at any moment, and make my husband hate and despise me. I wonder where Mr. Portland has gone? What will he find to say for himself when we next meet, I wonder?"

"Perhaps you may not meet him. Perhaps he will take good care to keep out of your way."

"What a horrid, odious man he is!" cried Nora. "I would rather be dead than married to such a man."

"So would I," said Nell; "but my task is done, and I must go. Good-bye, Lady Ilfracombe. I am glad to think I have made you so."

"But I shall see you again, Nell," suggested the Countess. "We leave Usk to-morrow afternoon, but I shall tell the Earl that I have met you, and he will come with me to wish you good-bye."

Nell's eyes had a far-away look in them, as she answered:

"To-morrow morning, then, Lady Ilfracombe, bring your husband over to the farm to say good-bye to me. And that will be the last, last time, remember. After that I will trouble you no more."

"You have never troubled me," cried Nora, genially; "indeed, I shall look back on this day in coming years, and say that you are the best friend I have ever had."

Nell turned to her quite brightly, as she replied:

"Yes, yes, I hope you will. I should like to think that you and he thought of me sometimes as your truest, though humblest, friend. For that, indeed, I am to both of you."

"I feel you are. I shall tell Ilfracombe so this very night," said Nora. "Kiss me once more, Nell, and thank you a thousand times. O how I wish I could repay you."

"You will repay me by making him happy. But—you
wear a silk handkerchief, Lady Ilfracombe—if you would give me that, in remembrance of this meeting, I should prize it more than I can say."

Nora tore it impetuously off her throat.

"Take it," she said, as she knotted it round that of Nell. "How I wish you had asked for my jewelry case instead."

Nell smiled faintly.

"I never valued jewels much," she replied, "though there was a time when I had plenty to wear. But this soft little handkerchief that has touched your neck, it shall go with me to my grave."

So they parted, the Countess dancing up the meadow steep again, with her letters in her hand, as if earth held no further care for her, and Nell walking slowly down the incline that led to the road, her head bent upon her breast and her eyes cast to the ground. One—going up to the greatest joy that life holds for any woman, the love and faith of an honest man—the other going down to all that was abhorrent and loathly to her. The success of the one dependent on the failure of the other—the happiness of the one due to the despair of the other—the triumph of the one built on the sacrifice of the other. Nora, who had been self-willed and rebellious through life, saved from the effects of her escapade by Nell, who had borne her lot so patiently and accepted all her disappointments as righteous retribution. It appears unequal, but it is the way things are worked in this world. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. In the next world, there will be dust and ashes for some of the great and fortunate ones of this earth, and crowns for the lowly and despised. And Nell Llewellyn's crown will sparkle with jewels, as heaven is studded with its stars.
CHAPTER IX.

As the Countess Ilfracombe returned to the Hall with her packet of letters in her hand, her heart was very glad, but at the same time it was filled with soberer thoughts than it had indulged in for some time past. What was, after all, the great difference between her and Nell Llewellyn? She had not fallen, it was true—she had not openly disgraced herself—but what had her flirtation with Jack Portland been, if not a lowering of her womanly dignity; a soiling of her purity; a smirching of the delicate bloom and whiteness that should have protected her maidenly life as with a veil? Nora felt terribly ashamed of herself, as she remembered it. Her great fear had passed away, thanks to Nell’s interest and intrepidity, and her mind had time to think of other things. This poor, despised girl, had saved her from all sorts of horrors; preserved her husband’s faith in her; his love for her; had placed in her hand, as it were, the whole happiness of her life. But she, herself—if she destroyed those letters, as she fully intended to do, how would she be any better than before—any more deserving of Ilfracombe’s affection and confidence? She would be safe, it is true; but safety did not constitute worthiness. And Nora had begun to long to deserve her husband’s love—to be able to accept it with an unburdened conscience—feeling that there was nothing between them, not even a shadow cast from the past. Could she—she asked herself, as she wended homewards—ever summon up the courage to tell him everything; to make him the arbiter of her destiny; to constitute him her judge, and await the sentence he chose to pronounce upon her? It would be very awful, she thought—terrible beyond description; she did not think she could possibly undergo such an ordeal. She pictured to herself Ilfracombe’s stern face, as he listened to the unfolding of a tale so dissonant to his own feelings—so unlike all he had conceived of her—so dreadful to hear of the woman of whom he thought so highly; whom he had chosen
for his wife, before all others. Nora shuddered when she thought thus, and told herself that it could not be; she valued his good opinion and his affection too highly. But there was another side of the question. Without telling Lord Ilfracombe her own part in the matter, how could she convince him of the treachery of Jack Portland towards them both; how induce him to break off, once and forever, the dangerous intimacy which united them. Her husband might refuse to believe her mere word, as he had refused before. He was a loyal friend and a generous man. He would not judge any one on the unproved testimony of another person. Without the proof, which these letters conveyed, would she have any more influence with him than she had had before, when he pooh-poohed her warnings as the idle fears of a well-meaning, but ignorant woman? And had she the courage, for the sake of them both, and especially for the sake of the husband whom she was beginning to love far better than she did herself, to brave the verdict of Ilfracombe's displeasure, and tell him the whole truth? Nell had been courageous for both their sakes. From a worldly point of view, she had no particular reason to care for the Earl's interests, still less for those of the wife who had supplanted her; yet she had braved being called a thief, and any other hard names Mr. Portland might have thought fit, in his rage, to cast at her, in order to do good to those who had, in a measure, wronged her. Nell was worth a thousand of Nora—so the wife of Ilfracombe said, inwardly, as she dwelt on these things. And, musing after this fashion, she reached the Hall, not much happier than she had left it. It was true that she had regained possession of the letters which had made a nightmare of her married life, but they had not brought the peace with them which she had imagined they would. She was out of a certain danger, but she was still herself, that was what Nora thought—still a wife who had deceived her trusting husband, and would not be cleansed, in her own eyes, till she had made a full confession of her sin. It was contemplating the divine forgiveness which Nell had extended to them both—the single-heartedness which she displayed; the patience and humility with which she bore her own sad lot, which was influencing Lady Ilfracombe,
almost unconsciously, to imitate her, as far as lay in her power.

Her indecision, combined with the promptings of the good angel within her, to do what was right, made Nora distraite and melancholy during the period of dressing for dinner; and when Lord Ilfracombe joined her, he chaffed her on the bad effects of botanizing with Jack.

"You had much better have come out with Lady Bowmant and myself, Nora," he said; "we have had a rousing time; but you look as dull as ditch-water. What has old Jack been saying to you to quench your spirits?"

"Your dear, particular friend has not been saying anything at all to me, Ilfracombe. I have not set eyes on him. He did not keep his appointment."

The Earl suspended his operations of dressing, and turned round to regard her with surprise.

"Jack didn't turn up?" he ejaculated. "Why, what on earth can be the reason?"

"I don't know," replied Nora, "and, what's more, I don't care."

"Ah, my lady, that sounds very much like pique," exclaimed her husband, laughing; "but for Jack not to keep an appointment with you! I cannot understand such a thing. I hope nothing's the matter with him."

"What should be the matter? Mr. Portland's like a bad halfpenny. He's bound to come back again."

"And how did you spend your afternoon, then, darling?" asked the Earl. "Wasn't it very stupid? How I wish you had come with us instead."

"I don't, Ilfracombe, for I have passed a very eventful afternoon. There is no time to tell you of it now, but you shall hear all when we find ourselves alone again. There's the second gong; we must go down. Now we shall hear what Mr. Portland has to say for himself."

They heard it as soon as they entered the drawing-room, where their hosts were waiting for them.

"Our party will be smaller than usual to-night, I am sorry to tell you," said Lady Bowmant. "I have just had a note from Mr. Portland to say he has been called away on important business till to-morrow. Isn't it extraordinary? He doesn't say where or by whom. When did
he get the summons? That is what puzzles me. He said nothing about it at luncheon; in fact, he settled to take a walk with you, if I am not mistaken, Lady Ilfracombe.”

“Yes, but he did not come,” answered Nora.

“I never knew old Jack to do such a thing in his life before,” remarked the Earl. “He is generally so punctual in his engagements. And as for business, why, he has no business, except pleasure. The idlest, most unpractical man I ever knew. What can the matter be? I am quite curious to learn.”

“Well, we must manage to do without him to-night, at all events,” said Lady Bowmant, who appeared to be rather offended by the breach of politeness. “I think Mr. Portland might have given us a little more notice; but it is really of no consequence.”

“And he might have let my wife know he couldn’t walk with her, instead of leaving her to cool her heels in the field waiting for him half the afternoon. I shall have a crow to pluck with Master Jack for this to-morrow.”

“O Ilfracombe, do you really think it is worth while?” exclaimed Nora. “I hope none of you will let him imagine that his absence was of the slightest consequence.”

“It becomes of consequence when he treats you with so little ceremony,” replied the Earl, as he offered his arm to his hostess to conduct her to the dining-room.

Mr. Portland’s vagaries were not mentioned again during the evening, but when Lord Ilfracombe entered his wife’s room that night and found her resting on the sofa in her dressing-gown instead of fast asleep in bed, the subject was renewed between them."

“Why, my darling, how is this?” he exclaimed. “Is your book so interesting that you cannot tear yourself away from it, or are you not sleepy to-night?”

“Neither,” answered Nora, gravely. “I was only waiting for my husband.”

“And now you have your husband,” he answered, playfully, as he cast himself down beside her, “what is it?”

“I want to have a little talk with you, Ilfracombe,” she said, seriously, “and I don’t know how to begin.”

“What is it all about, sweetheart?” he asked her, with
a kiss. His manner was enough to disarm any amount of fears, but it was so confident that it made Nora still more nervous.

"I wish you wouldn't kiss me," she said, almost petulantly. "I am going to tell you something about myself that will make you very angry, and then you will think I accepted your kisses on false pretences."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, Nora," he replied. "But whatever you may have done, I can assure you of my forgiveness beforehand, so you can take my kiss as an installment in advance."

"Don't you be too sure of that," said his wife. "It is something that happened before our marriage, and I wasn't too good a girl then, I can assure you. I did all sorts of awful things, and I feel sure you will wish you had never married me, when you hear them."

"And why do you tell me of them now, my dear girl? We have been married a year, and you have never thought of doing such a thing before. Neither do I desire to hear anything about the past. Let it rest in peace. You know I was not a saint myself."

"But you told me all about that, Ilfracombe, and I was so silly, I was too frightened to follow your example."

"But who dared to frighten you, darling? Couldn't you trust your husband?" he said, tenderly. Nora snuggled up close to his side, and buried her face in his bosom as she whispered:

"No; because I loved you so, I was afraid of losing your love and esteem. If you knew what a wild, reckless girl I have been, Ilfracombe! Do you remember, one day, after we were engaged, when you asked me if I had ever had a lover before yourself, what I replied?"

"That you had had so many you couldn't count them, I believe," said the Earl, laughing.

"No, no, not that; but that there had been one man to whom I was engaged, but papa would not hear of our marriage because he had no money."

"Yes. Well, what of him?"

"It was Mr. Portland," said Nora, with her face still hidden. But her husband, in his astonishment, sat bolt upright, and put her away.
“Jack? O impossible! Nora, why did you not tell me of this before?”

“Because—O I am coming to that by and by. But indeed, it is true. He was at Malta, you may remember, just at that time, two years before I met you, and staying with his sister, Mrs. Loveless. He told you he had met me there. He was very different in appearance then, from what he is now, and I flirted and ‘spooned’ with him, till I fancied I was head over ears in love, and he incited me on to be far more wild than I had ever been before. When I look back, and think how young and foolish I was, I see he behaved very badly to me.”

“Tell me all, Nora,” said the Earl, sternly.

“I will tell you all—don’t be afraid. I used to creep out of my father’s house after dinner, and meet Mr. Portland late at night, sometimes as late as twelve o’clock, and then sneak back again when everyone had gone to bed. We used to sit under the orange trees for hours, talking, and all that sort of folly, you know—”

(“O yes, I know,” acquiesced the Earl, with a groan.)

—and one day we went out in a boat, and were caught in a squall, and had to stay away till the morning. We were with people all the time in a little inn, and papa never found out that Mr. Portland was with me, but he was.”

“Any more pleasant stories to tell me?” asked her husband.

“No; that is the worst (bad enough, too, isn’t it?), as far as I am concerned; but I was foolish enough during that time, to write Jack a lot of letters. I used to write two and three times a day when I didn’t see him, and in them I spoke very freely of all the pranks we had played together. He wrote to me as well, of course; but, when we parted, I destroyed his letters, but he—kept mine.”

“Hasn’t he given them up to you?” demanded Ilfracombe, quickly.

“I have them now; but listen quietly to me, Ilfracombe, for a moment. You were rather vexed with me when we first came home to Thistlemere, because I did not welcome your bosom friend with the cordiality you wished me to extend to him. Why, if I had had courage to tell you the
truth, you would have kicked him out of the house. For, from the moment we met again, whenever Mr. Portland has seen my disapproval of his influence over you in racing and gambling matters, he has held the threat over my head, that if I tried to dissuade you from throwing your money away, he would hand over those letters of mine, and make you hate and despise me as much as he did."

"The scoundrel!" said Ilfracombe, between his teeth.

"He has promised, over and over again, to restore me these letters," continued Nora, "and again and again he has broken his word. He never meant to give them to me at all, I am convinced of that. He knew that, as soon as I got them in my own hands, I should have the courage to speak to you and prove to you how unworthy he is."

"How did you get them at last, then, Nora?"

"Now comes the hardest part of my confession, Ilfracombe, and I shall never be able to make it whilst you look at me like that."

The Earl tried to smile, as he replied:

"I am not angry with you, Nora, only utterly disgusted with Jack for turning out such a low blackguard, and with myself for being so blind as to believe him to be an honorable man."

"But you will be angry with me for this. Two nights ago he told me that if I went over to his room at the farm I should receive my letters—and I went."

"You visited Portland at his sleeping apartments? O Nora, I thought you had too much pride in your position as my wife—too much respect for yourself to do such a thing!"

"I would not have gone for anything but those letters," she cried. "O Ilfracombe, believe me and forgive me! I never was a liar. He said they were in his dispatch-box, and I was fool enough to believe him, and fell into the trap. And when I got there, he declared that he had made a mistake, and must have left them in town—all lies—all lies!"

"Then how did you get them at last?"

"He wrote me a note this morning—here it is," said Nora, as she produced it from her blotting case, "to say he had telegraphed for the packet and it had arrived from town, and if I would meet him in the meadow this after-
noon I should receive them. That was the secret of my
taking a walk with him, you see, Ilfracombe. I take a
walk voluntarily with the brute! I would rather be hanged
any day," cried Nora, impetuously.

"But he never came, you say?"

"No; but some one else did. Can you guess who it
was? That Miss Llewellyn, from the farm—she is really
your girl; she is no more drowned than I am, and O she
is so sweet and nice! However did you come to give her
up for me?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Nora!" said the Earl. "I knew
some days back that Nell is still alive, but thought it just
as well not to mention the subject to you. But did she
bring you your letters?"

"Yes, she did, the dear, good girl! She was at her bed-
room window, which overlooks Portland's, when I went
there, and heard my entreaties to him to return my letters
and his brutal, sarcastic replies; so, as soon as I was gone,
she confronted him and made him give them up to her—
how, she did not tell me—only he did, and she brought
them to me. O I was glad! I kissed her a dozen times for
her kindness."

"But why did she do it?" demanded the Earl. "I can-
not understand her interest in the matter, nor how she
induced Portland to do what you could not. It was like
Nell; she always was resolute and plucky, but what was the
motive?"

"Her love for you, Ilfracombe," replied his wife, gravely,
"and her desire to keep your name untarnished. O you
have never known what was in her noble nature, that is
very clear. She is twice the woman I am, or ever shall be.
She ought to have been your wife, and she is fit for it."

"Nora, Nell is a good girl, and I deeply regret the part
I played in soiling her life; but there is only one wife in
the world for me, and she is by my side. It was very good
of poor Nell, very generous, very kind, to have done what
she has for you, and we must think of some means of
repaying her. And I am glad to tell you, for her sake and
my own, that she is going to be married herself. She came
to see me this morning about some business of her father's,
and told me the news."
"Going to be married!" repeated Nora, with womanly intuition; "are you sure? She did not mention such a thing to me. And she looked so sad, and spoke so sadly, she made me cry. I don't think she can be going to be married. And when I asked her what I could do to return her kindness, she said: 'Love him with all your heart and soul and never have a secret from him again.'"

"And do you, Nora?" whispered Ilfracombe.

"Love me with all your heart and soul?"

She turned and threw her arms about his neck.

"I do, I do! my darling, and never so much as at this moment. Neither will I ever have a secret from you again. There are the letters," she continued, as she drew the packet from her pocket and placed it in his hand.

"They were written so long ago that I don't remember what is in them; but whatever it may be, good, bad or indifferent, read it all, dear, and judge me as you will. At all events, you will know the worst, and I need not fear that I am claiming your love under false pretences, for the future."

"And so this is the poor little packet that has kept us apart for so long," murmured the Earl, as he regarded it, "but, thank God, has not been powerful enough to sever us from each other's confidence forever. And you give me leave to do what I will with it—to read its contents from end to end?"

"Yes, yes, only be quick over it. The suspense of your decision is so hard to bear. Perhaps—who knows, Ilfracombe?—after you have seen the folly I have written to another man, you may not wish to have anything to do with me again."

"Yes; I should think that was very probable," remarked the Earl, with quiet amusement, as he placed the packet in the empty grate and lighted a match under it. "See, Nora, that is how I read your poor little love-letters of long ago. How very amusing they are! But, confound the things, they won't burn. Come, that's better. They're blazing up beautifully now. And I only wish I could see Mr. Jack Portland blazing up with them!"

Lady Ilfracombe looked up joyfully.
"O darling, is that true?" she exclaimed. "Shall we never have our happiness interrupted more, by looking on him again?"

"Why, rather not. What do you take me for? Do you think I would associate with the man who has played you such a dirty trick, and nearly upset our married happiness? No, my dearest, I value you too much for that. Mr. Portland has seen the last of any house which owns me as master."

"O Ilfracombe, you have made me so exquisitely happy. Oh how I wish poor Nell were as happy as I am. I told her we were leaving Usk to-morrow, and promised that we would go over to the farm together first, and wish her farewell. You will come with me, won't you, darling?"

"Of course I will, since you wish it. You have behaved in a most generous manner regarding this young woman, Nora, and I shall never forget it. That reminds me that, according to my promise to her this morning, I have been sounding Sir Archibald as to the chance of being able to purchase Panty-cuckoo Farm, and I find he is quite ready to sell it at a reasonable price. I fancy they are getting rather hard-up on account of her ladyship's extravagance. So I intend to close with him, and make over the title-deeds to Nell as a wedding present. She refused to let me make any provision for her, as I think I told you, but this I shall insist upon."

"Yes, do; it was just like her, dear thing, to refuse your money. Ilfracombe, you owe her a great deal. She was very much attached to you. I could see that by every word she said."

"Hush, Nora dear, don't allude to it now. You women are apt to grow sentimental when you get together, talking over the same man. She cared for me well enough—so did I for her, but you see we are both going to be married, and live happy ever afterwards. That is the end of most fairy tales, whether they happen in this world or the other. Kiss me, my own darling, and tell me once more that you love me. That is the only thing that concerns us now."
CHAPTER X.

Mr. Portland had two reasons for not appearing at Usk Hall on the evening of the day he married Nell Llewellyn. In the first place, he did not fancy seeing the Countess again after she had heard the truth about her letters—in the second, he foresaw more difficulty in getting away if he left it till after dinner. To have received a summons to London by telegraph or post in the afternoon, and to have been compelled to quit Usk at once, seemed more feasible to him, than to announce his determination before the assembled company, to be submitted to their cross-questioning—sent to the railway station in Sir Archibald's carriage; perhaps accompanied by the genial host himself—and to have to bribe the servants to conceal the fact that he never went at all. After that evening, so he argued, when all the world must know that he had married Nell, he would not mind confessing the little ruse to which he had had recourse, and felt sure of receiving sympathy and forgiveness. So he went to "The Three Pilchards" and engaged his rooms, and ordered his dinner in a state of pleased expectancy. The accommodation was not very grand—the cuisine would not, doubtless, be first-rate, but Nell had never been a gourmande nor a sybarite, and Mr. Portland pleased himself with thinking how well he would treat her in the future. What with the various race meetings he had attended, he had been pretty lucky lately, and the visit to Usk Hall had not failed to recoup him still more. He would be able to take his wife abroad to Paris or Italy, if she so wished it, and show her a little life. Perhaps, though, it would be better to run over to Monte Carlo or Homburg, and so combine business with pleasure. How divinely handsome she was, "a daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most divinely fair." With what envious eyes he would be followed by the frequenters of the places he thought of. He had little fear that his wife would be recognized by the herd as Lord Ilfracombe's former
mistress. She had kept herself too much at home for that, and had hardly ever been seen in public whilst living with the Earl. It would only be a few of his intimates who would be likely to know her again. And Jack Portland would not have concerned himself about it if they had. He had married his wife for himself—not for the world, and it was welcome to think what it liked of his choice. A few old cats, whose virtue had never been attacked during the best part of a century, might turn up their noses at her, but Nell was strong enough to hold her own, and so was he. If a thought crossed his mind that Ilfracombe, on hearing of his marriage with Nell, might insist on giving her as a wedding portion what she had refused as a peace offering, we must do him the justice to say that it had no weight with him, excepting as it might prove the Earl's good feeling towards them both, and be the precursor of a renewed intimacy. For, if something of the kind did not interfere, Jack Portland felt that the condition Nell had made regarding the packet of letters would prove the quietus to his friendship with Ilfracombe. If the Countess told her husband the whole truth, he would never receive him again. Of that he was certain. But there was the chance that, for her own sake, Nora would not tell him the truth; and in that case, if he heard of the marriage first, he might never be told of the other little affair at all; and the Countess, secure of herself, might join her husband in extending her hospitality to him. This was what Mr. Portland was dreaming of, as he sat in the parlor of "The Three Pilchards," smoking, and waiting for Nell's arrival. As the time went on and she did not appear, he grew rather fidgety. He had had his dinner at his usual hour of seven, but, as nine o'clock sounded, it struck him that Nell might expect to see supper waiting for her, so rang the bell to order it.

"What have you in the house? What can I have for supper?"

"Supper, sir?" echoed the country waiter, who, though he could play a very pretty tune with a knife and fork himself, was rather taken aback at the gentleman requiring supper at nine after a hearty dinner at seven.

"Yes. Are you deaf? I expect my wife here soon
A BANKRUPT HEART.

and she may require something to eat. What can we have?"

"We have a joint of cold beef in the house, sir, and a veal and 'am pie, and——"

"None of those will do. I want something hot."

"A chicken, sir, with a cauliflower and potatoes?" suggested the waiter.

"Yes, yes. The best you have, whatever it may be. Get it ready as soon as you can. My wife may be here at any moment. Another bottle of that champagne, too, which I had at dinner. Cursed bad stuff," he added to himself, as the servant left the room, "but women don't know the difference. Well, who would ever have thought I could have stood such discomfort as this, with so good a grace, for the sake of a woman. But such a woman. I don't believe she has her peer in England. As for that little, sharp-featured, flirting, deceitful Countess, she can't hold a candle to her. What fools and blind men are, with regard to women. It is quite impossible to decide why one piece of femininity should hold them, as in a vice, whilst they pass over, or ignore the virtues of another. Now, to my mind, Nell combines all the perfections of which human nature is capable. She is beautiful—amiable (a bit of a temper, but she very seldom shows it, and a woman is worth nothing without a spice of the devil in her)—dignified, sensible and modest. She would have made a magnificent Countess—beaten Lady D——, and Lady S——, and all the other Court beauties hollow. However, I'm very glad Ilfracombe didn't see it in that light, and that the crumbs from the rich man's table have fallen to my share. Hang it all! What a time she is. It's nearly ten. Surely she isn't going to play off any airs and graces on me, and pose as a blushing bride? Or is it only a womanly dodge to make her welcome more assured? She needn't fear missing it. I never felt so much for any woman in my life before. I almost think, if she thought it worth her while, that she might make a better man of me. I wonder if she will learn to love me—I know what her love for that ass, Ilfracombe, was, and that it is worth a man's trying for. I wonder—I wonder—By Jove! that's the half hour striking. Whatever can be the reason of this delay? Waiter!" con-
continued Mr. Portland to the man, who now appeared with
the supper, "is that half past ten that struck just now? Surely, your clocks must be very fast."

"Don't think so, sir. I heard the missus asking the
master to put 'em on a bit just now. Do you think the
lady will come to-night, sir?"

"Of course she will. What do you mean by asking me
such a question?"

"Only, you see, sir, we're obliged to close at eleven,
whether we like or no, so the missus told me to ask you
if——"

"Here," exclaimed Jack Portland, quickly; "get me pen
and ink and paper at once. I must send a messenger up to
Panty-cuckoo Farm."

"Panty-cuckoo Farm!" repeated the waiter—"Mr. Llew-
ellyn's place? That be better than a mile and an 'arf away
from here, sir. It'll take a good bit of time to carry a letter
there to-night."

"Never mind. I'm willing to pay for it, and for keep-
ing you up as well. But the message must be carried by
some one. Whom have you to send?"

"I expect the 'ostler can go, but I'll ask the missus," re-
plied the waiter, as he went to consult the higher powers.

In a few minutes he returned to say the hostler would take
the letter, and Mr. Portland dispatched his missive on its
way. It contained but a very few words. Only:

"What is the reason of this delay? Pray come at once.
Am waiting here impatiently.

JACK."

He did not know into whose hands it might fall, so
thought it best to be as curt as possible. And then he sat
down to get through the time as best he might till his
messenger returned. How trying are the moments when
we wait in utter darkness the explanation of some mystery
which is inexplicable to us! What a thousand and one
fancies rush through our brain as we attempt to penetrate
what is impenetrable! How we "think" it may be that—
or we "fancy" it must be this—or we "fear" the other.
Then, tired out with conjecture, we resolve not to think at
all, but wait the natural sequence of events—only to fall
back upon fancy, and worry ourselves to death with imagination. And, after all, it usually turns out to be nothing—a bogey conjured up by our anxiety—due, as likely as not, to the selfishness of our friend, who had not sufficient feeling for us to suspect what we were suffering on his behalf. We have all, at some time or other, experienced the feeling of which Mr. Portland was suffering now. Yes, actually suffering!

This selfish, immoral, dishonorable man had found his match at last in fate. Nell Llewellyn was the one creature who had ever awakened any better or higher feelings in his hardened heart, and he was suffering the agony of thinking that she might have repented of her bargain and meant to play him false, as he had played so many other people. The hostler took his time to walk to Panty-cuckoo Farm. He was going to be paid for his trouble, under any circumstances, so he didn’t see the fun of hurrying himself. Besides, the farm was more than a mile away, and one mile makes two, on a dark night. So it was twelve o’clock before the waiter reappeared with Mr. Portland’s own note on a salver.

“If you please, sir, the hostler, he ’ave been to Panty-cuckoo Farm, but everybody’s abed, and he couldn’t make no one hear.”

“Couldn’t make anybody hear!” exclaimed Jack Portland, starting to his feet. “What was the fool about? Why didn’t he knock till he did make some one hear? What was the good of his going, when he only brings me my own note back again?”

“Well, sir, he did throw stones at the bedroom winders, but no one took no notice of ’im, so Joe, he thought ’twas no use waiting about there any longer at this time o’ night, so he brought the note back again; and perhaps you’d like me to send it up the fast thing in the morning.”

“No, no,” replied Jack Portland, angrily; “the ’ostler is a d—d fool for his pains, and you may tell him I said so. Leave the note on the table and leave the room. I wish to be alone.”

“Are we to shut up, sir? Will the lady come to-night, do you think? The last train was in an hour ago.”

“Shut up, shut up! yes. Do anything you like, I don’t care, so long as you leave me alone,” was the reply.
“Yes, sir, certainly. And what time would you like to be called in the morning, sir?”

“O go to the devil!” cried Portland, furiously, as the man disappeared, repeating his usual formula of “Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” and left him to his disappointment and conjectures.

What could be the matter? Where was Nell? What was she doing? What did she mean? These were the questions that repeated themselves over and over in his brain, and which received no answer till the following morning. He would have his answer then, he thought. He would go up to Panty-euckoo Farm the very first thing, and tell the Llewellyns of his marriage to their daughter, and, if need be, take his wife back with him by force. No power on earth could prevent that. But it was not the sort of honeymoon he had promised himself.

Meanwhile, Lord and Lady Ilfracombe were saying to each other, as we have seen before: “We will go over to the farm to-morrow morning and say good-by to Nell, and tell her of all the good things we mean to do for her when she is married.” And so, at last, they all slept, the husband and wife locked in each other’s arms—Jack Portland restlessly, and starting up every now and then to remember his disappointment with an oath—and Nell Llewellyn slept also, the sweetest and most peaceful sleep of them all.

She had gone straight home to her parents when she parted with Nora, and had passed a very pleasant evening with them. The old people had been particularly cheerful. Rennie, the cow, had quite recovered, and was giving her milk as well as ever, and Sir Archibald Bowmant had met the farmer on his way home, and intimated to him that he was likely to have a change of landlords.

“I do think,” said Mr. Llewellyn, “as his lordship buying the old farm is the grandest thing I’ve ever heard on. And if it come to pass (and Sir Archibald spoke of it as a settled thing), mother and me, we shall feel as we owe it all to you, my lass, sha’n’t us, mother?”

“Yes, indeed,” acquiesced the old woman. “It’s all due to Nell, there’s no question of that. It was a fortunate day for us when you took service with the Earl, Nell, though we were both set agen your going to London at
the time. But there, one never knows how things will turn out."

Nell looked gratified by her parents' approval. She had been more serious and silent than usual that evening, but now she seemed to brighten up, and talked with them of all they should do and say when Lord Ilfracombe came to tell them of his kindness in person.

"Aye, but that will be a grand occasion," quoth her mother, "and you must do credit to it, my lass. I daresay the Earl will bring his lady with him, and we must all put on our Sunday best to do them honor."

"Mother," said Nell, presently, "I have something to tell you. I saw Lady Ilfracombe in the fields this afternoon, and she said that she and the Earl intended to call here to-morrow morning. They are going to leave Usk Hall to-morrow afternoon, and so I daresay they will take this opportunity to tell father about the farm. You mustn't go out to-morrow, father, till you have seen them."

"I go out?" exclaimed the farmer, "on such an occasion! I should think not. Why, no one in the house shall stir till they're come and gone. Has the parlor been swept to-day? for, if not, you and mother will have to stay up till it's done. I couldn't have his lordship sitting down in a dusty room. That wouldn't be the way to make him think us good tenants."

"A dusty room!" cried the old woman, indignantly. "We've been man and wife, now, for five and twenty years come Michaelmas, Griffith Llewellyn, and you can't name the day you've ever seen my parlor dusty yet. The Queen herself, God bless her, might enter it any day in the week and not soil her royal robes."

"Well, well! Wife, there's enough words about that," said her husband. "I'm proud to hear his lordship's coming to Panty-cuckoo, and glad that Nell gave us warning of it. Did you find an opportunity to ask if there's a chance of your entering the Earl's service again, my girl?" he continued, to his daughter.

Nell left her seat and approached her father's side, winding her arm round the old man's neck and laying her cheek gently against his.

"No, dear father," she said; "I didn't mention the sub-
ject. I don’t think I shall ever go to service again, dear! I am not so strong as I was, and it would be too hard for me.”

She strangled a kind of sob in her throat as she proceeded:

“I have been a great burden on you for the last year, father, but I won’t be so much longer. If I can’t go to service, I will provide for myself some way, never fear that.”

“Aye, my lass, it will be as well. You’re a bonny lass, there’s no denying, but you don’t seem to care much for marriage, and when your mother and me is gone, you’ll have a sore shift to provide for yourself, if you have no work to do. I mentioned his lordship’s service because it seems to me as it has left you pretty well unfit for anything else. Your hands and face, and your constitution ain’t fit for a farm-house, Nell, and that’s the truth. They improved you and they spoiled you both, up in London. You’re fitter for the town than the country—any one could see that with half an eye. But you’re a good girl, my dear, and mother and me, we both say that.”

“Thank you, father,” she replied, as she kissed him several times—more times than were necessary, according to the rough old farmer’s ideas—and then did the same by her mother.

“Good-night, dear, dear mother,” she murmured, fervently. “You’ve been a good mother to your poor, thoughtless, useless Nell.”

“Aye, that I have,” replied Mrs. Llewellyn, with the beautiful self-assurance of the poor; “but you’re worth it, all the same.”

“Thank you, dear. God bless you!” said Nell, gently, as she prepared to leave the room. At the door she turned, and stood regarding the two old people with her lovely hazel eyes, as if she could not gaze enough at them.

“You’re a rare fool!” cried her mother, gaily. “There, run away to your bed, do, and get up wiser in the morning.”

And then, as her daughter, with a solemn smile, disappeared, she remarked to her husband:

“I’m sometimes half afeared, father, if that girl ain’t a bit mazed; she do look at one so queer with them big eyes of hers. Did you notice her just now?”
“Not I,” replied the farmer. “I’ve other things to do besides noticing a maid’s eyes. So now come along to bed, wife, and forget all such rubbish, for we’ll have to be up betimes to make ready to receive his lordship.”

And the old couple went up to their room, laughing and cackling as they passed Nell’s door.

And, as they did so, the clock struck nine.

She heard it as she stood in her bedroom, with her hands clasped in front of her, dazed and bewildered. The world seemed to have closed on her with her parents’ good-night kisses—all the people in it appeared to have become indistinct and blurred. They were fading away before her mental vision, one by one—the Earl and his Countess—Jack Portland—Hugh Owen—her father and mother—Hetty, every one. Nell felt she had done with them all forever. At one moment she thought of writing to Hugh Owen. He had loved her and had great hopes of her, and she had dashed them all aside. She was sorry for his disappointment and his broken faith. Should she write and tell him so? But what could she say, except that the man he saw with her was her former lover; and if he discovered him to be the Earl, there would be another unpleasantness for Ilfracombe. No; her life had been all a muddle and a mistake; it was best to leave it so. She could not unravel it, and the more she touched it, the more entangled it became. Best to remain silent to the last. Not a thought of Jack Portland entered her head. She had made a certain compact with him, and she had meant to end it like this all along. But she moved across the room with a soft, lingering step and eyes that seemed already covered with the film of death, and gazed from the window that looked toward the house where he was sleeping.

“Good-bye,” she murmured, indistinctly, “good-bye!”

And then Nell turned away, and, taking hold of a chair, dragged it to the wardrobe, and, mounting on it, took down the bottle of poison, for which her mother had told her to write a label.

THE END.
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