SIR GASPARD'S AFFINITY

BY

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Author of
'The Rosy Cross, and other Psychical Tales;' and
'The Worship of Lucifer.'

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INTRODUCTION

I, Arline Baxábert, Granddaughter of Sir Gaspard Baxábert, Bart., and of Lady Baxábert (Victoria), his wife, write these few words in order to explain the circumstances under which this simple story was narrated. We, the Grandchildren, assembled round our beloved Grandmother (Victoria) every evening, whilst she related this tale, picking up the thread each time, at the point where she had previously dropped it. I took notes as she proceeded, and as I am blessed with a good memory, I think you have the story just as it fell from dear Grannie’s lips, for I arranged and put it together with much care.

(Signed) Arline Baxábert.

(Signed) Victoria, Lady Baxábert, who declares and affirms that the statement of the afore-named Arline Baxábert is correct.

This 27th of August 1896.
Bax Priory, Kent.
SIR GASPARD’S AFFINITY

CHAPTER I

You ask me, dear children, for so you seem to me although you are grown up, to tell you the story of my life; of the many long years I have passed. You gaze at my face as if to read my thoughts, and in the guileless countenances, so transparent in their sweet candour to such an experienced world-wise person as myself, I read your thoughts far more clearly than you can guess mine, and they are these: ‘Ah,’ you say, ‘how old, how very old she is, her hair is white, her brow is furrowed by time or care, or both. Her grey eyes are still bright, but something in their expression tells us that at least once—perhaps long ago—she has suffered deeply, but there is no sorrow in them now; only its traces linger, reflected or mirrored, as it were, in their depths, whilst above is firmly stamped the seal of contentment. She has known more radiant happiness than bitter pain, but an intimate acquaintance with grief, maybe in her youth, has widened her views, softened and strengthened her character, and made her strangely sympathetic. Therefore do we fly to her for refuge and consolation in all our little trials; we open our hearts to her, for we know that dear Grannie ever understands, as others do not always, and that she will always comfort us. Sometimes she sighs and says, ‘What a happy girlhood is yours,”
that is because hers was the very reverse, we are sure.' You blush and tell me that I must surely be a witch, for that indeed I am perfectly correct in my surmises.

Well, my dears, I am, in truth, an old woman, seventy-three next birthday; and during my long life, doubtless I have gathered some knowledge of persons and things, and have gained some slight insight to spirit and matter; souls that are not honest and pure, cannot conceal their vileness from me so easily as formerly, yet I have always been sensitive, and my intuition would detect the evil. How the wind whistles round the corners of the house; do you hear it? It is bitterly drear and cold without, and deliciously cosy and warm within. See how bright the fire burns; thank God that we are so comfortable, and let us not be forgetful of those who are shivering on these wintry nights; I mean let each and all of us endeavour to do something to help such. 'Tiresome old lady,' you may say, but no; your hearts are kind, and you know me well enough to feel certain that I have not any desire to preach; but you are young, and the young are apt to be thoughtless, though youth is fleeting, only once does it come with its joyous glamour, and a very beautiful thing it is, and its gay carelessness too. Now I won't be tedious, but begin at once to relate the story you wish to hear, commonplace though it may be; well, you must judge of that. Did you ever hear of Cain Waite? No. Then I must give you some information about him first, for you will be surprised later to learn the extent of his influence, and how it reached to me and mine, and appeared to colour and alter lives, although perhaps the word 'alter' is too strong; for surely we are all in higher hands than in those of any human being, but it seems to me that at any rate there are strong, powerful natures of a domineering kind that are instruments permitted for some good reason to interfere in the affairs of others, and to master weaker people, and
lead them into different grooves, whether for better or worse.

Cain Waite was such a man. He possessed wonderful magnetism, no doubt, for he attracted crowds in the villages through which he passed. He was a kind of Methodist Preacher, and used literally to stand on a tub and hold forth wherever he could command an audience, and after his discourse he would invite the bystanders to come and converse with him. Cain dearly loved an argument, and such topics as 'The Devil's Work,' 'The Torture of the Lost in Hell,' and the rejoicings of the Elect, were to him sources of never-ending delight, and he exulted in being able to worst an adversary in wordy conflict. He was wont to hold an open Bible in his hand, and to quote from it in order to uphold his theories, and he naturally interpreted the various passages and texts to suit his own views; and as he was certainly a firm believer in his own opinions, whilst having a marvellous gift of speech, his opponents were usually nowhere, and besides being made to feel extremely small, were constantly converted to his way of thinking.

Cain's home was near Havant in Hampshire. He worked on his own farm, a very modest one, and when he was not 'Missionising,' his time was pretty well taken up in looking after his two cows, the chickens, ducks and sheep, besides being compelled to divide his attention with the fat pony, the antiquated carriage, and the garden; for Cain was not wealthy enough to be able to employ many hands, so he had to content himself with the services of two raw village lads, and with the help that his wife was able to give him in the time she could spare from the household duties. They were childless; so much the better, I should say, for Cain's religion was of too terrifying and repulsive a nature to have been ingrafted in the minds of his progeny.

Never shall I forget the first time I beheld this curious
fanatic, nor the impression his personality made upon me. I cannot have been more than nine years old (I leave you to calculate the time), and Cain must have been about thirty or thereabouts, I imagine. My nurse was taking me to the village Post Office one evening (you know where my father's, your great-grandfather's house, Croft Manor, still stands? quite close to the common); well, Cain Waite stood near the pump that you remember seeing so often. He was surrounded by a group of gaping rustics, to whom he was discoursing most eloquently, his right hand pointing upwards and his left hand grasping an open Bible. His countenance inspired me with the greatest terror; his eyes seemed flaming, the nostrils of his long aquiline nose were dilated, his long black hair shook like a shaggy mane, as he moved his head backwards and forwards in his intense excitement: 'And unless you are able to believe, as I tell you, without the smallest thought of a doubt, you must perish everlastingly.

'You must burn and burn for ever in hell fire.' These were the words he was bellowing forth in a voice of thunder. My nurse had stopped to listen, and by her side was I, holding my breath in mingled fear and astonishment.

'No matter what good works ye may do,' he continued in awful tones, 'they will be of no use—they will but help to pave hell, and to make the fire burn all the fiercer unless you believe; do you hear me?'

Then there was the sounds of moans and sobs, as some of the women amongst his hearers could retain their composure no longer, frightened beyond measure by the horrible doctrine of Eternal Punishment which Cain held up to them, and forced upon them with such unmerciful and vigorous severity. I was melted to tears also from sheer fright, and, observing my condition, the nurse caught hold of my hand and hurried me
forward, as she said in tremulous tones, 'But you must mind and be a good girl, Miss Victoria, for if not, for certain sure, you will go to that awful place. Cain speaks the truth, it's written in the Bible, you know.'

I shuddered. 'Are you quite sure if it is true, Martha?' I asked appealingly.

'Of course it is,' she replied ominously, 'and whenever I know he is in the neighbourhood, and I have time, I come and listen to that good man, who is doing his best to save perishing souls.'

We entered the little shop, which was Post Office as well, and where stamps were handed over the counter to my nurse, whilst above were dangling sundry joints of the unclean animal, the whole atmosphere being pervaded with an odour of bacon, mingled with cheese; for of the latter product there was a fair amount, besides butter, tea, sugar and other articles of every-day consumption, which were neatly arranged on one end of the counter and on shelves in the wall. It may seem strange to you young folks that I should be able to recall these little trivialities, but I have a good memory, and they were more firmly impressed upon my mind than such things usually are, on account of Cain Waite. The incidents of the day on which I first set eyes on him stand out sharply and clearly, he being the central figure. Everything else that I saw or did at that time appears to belong to him, to surround him, as it were, in the way the scenery forms a back-ground to the actor, and the stage properties seem part and parcel of him, all assisting to build up the whole. I cannot recollect all that happened on other days in the same way, so I fancy that the reason I have given you for this entire remembrance is the correct one. I know that we returned home another way down a green lane, which lane runs through the Manor estate, and in which you too have often walked, gathering wild flowers meanwhile.
It had been a glorious afternoon—the month was July, but very oppressively warm, and I think I can now see the big black clouds gathering over the blue sky, and obscuring the sun as we neared the last stile, that divides the park from the garden. Fortunately we just reached the house in time, for at that moment there was a flash of lightning followed by a terrific clap of thunder, which told us how near the storm was, and then there was flash after flash, and peal after peal like roaring cannons, and then the rain came, a regular downpour, but we were safe indoors.

My poor mother, I can see her now, drawing down the blinds in her bedroom and covering the looking-glass with a shawl—she was so afraid of lightning—she sat down in an arm-chair, in the furthest corner of the room away from the windows, and drew me down on her lap. How lovely she was, and how gentle; she had the prettiest blue eyes and the softest light brown hair that I have ever seen, and the sweetest smile always played around her mouth—when she spoke to me at least. No, not when she was talking to my father, your great-grandfather, dear girls. It is no good disguising truth or mincing matters: you know from hearsay what he was then. I believe that when your great-grandmother was with him she was never at her ease—at least I used to notice that if she had been laughing merrily and chatting with my only sister and me, as soon as he appeared she would suddenly grow silent, and even sometimes when he addressed her in his cold and harsh tones, I have seen her grow white to the lips.

Well, on that afternoon, as I sat on my mother's knee, he burst into the room; I felt my mother tremble.

'Frightened as usual?' he said sarcastically, frowning so that his heavy black eyebrows met over his nose.

She made no reply, but I saw that she winced and grew paler.
‘And encouraging this child to indulge her foolish whims also,’ he continued in an angry tone of voice. ‘That I simply will not allow. Get up, Victoria, immediately, and come downstairs with me,’ he said roughly.

I obeyed, but turning to my mother as I reached the door, I cried: ‘But oh, mamma, I can’t bear to leave you alone.’

‘Nonsensical sham sentiment,’ muttered my father under his breath, as he held the handle, being already half out of the room. ‘Come along,’ he added impatiently to me, and just leaving me sufficient space to pass, he banged the door quickly after me. ‘Go and play the piano or anything else you like, and don’t be a fool,’ he said, as I descended to an almost empty room at the back of the house, which was given up to my sister and me to make hay in, as the phrase is, for therein we could do whatever we liked, cook, paint, and make the usual mess that children delight in.

We had a governess, a cross old thing we considered her; she lived up in the schoolroom, and she neither troubled us, nor we her, out of school hours. Miss Bacon was her name, and she gave herself out as being a descendant of the Great Roger, which amused us greatly. She was prim, stiff and starch, and had mighty little patience; she was no favourite of my mother’s, but my father had a high opinion of her, and would not hear of her leaving; that I know for a fact, but why she ever came to us I never knew, for I should have thought she would have considered it beneath her dignity to undertake the education of two such young children as we were on her arrival; I have, however, a latent shrewd suspicion that her age was rather against her, and that possibly she had not the choice of many situations; I also feel pretty certain that my father must have had something to do in her selection.
Miss Bacon was in the habit of taking offence at nothing at all, and I distinctly remember, how on one memorable occasion, the little black cap which she always wore caught fire over the candle, by which she was studying a map, whilst giving my sister a lesson in geography. Cecilia had sufficient presence of mind to extinguish the rising flames with promptitude, and after the danger was passed, she was able to maintain a grave demeanour, when she beheld the curious spectacle of straggling and scant locks, which the poor governess's head presented. As for me, I regret to say that I burst out laughing, and of course Miss Bacon was furious, and would not speak to me for a whole week. The good lady wore false teeth, but of this we had no idea, until on one afternoon she appeared minus her two front ones; we gazed at her in undisguised horror, thinking she had met with an accident.

'Your teeth, Miss Bacon!' we exclaimed in one breath.

She left the room promptly with her thin lips tightly pressed together, and to our astonishment presently returned with the missing walrus-like fangs replaced. We then discovered that we had suddenly grown wiser, so we discreetly held our tongues, whilst she also kept silence, and to our intense surprise, displayed for once not the faintest ire.

But to return to where I broke off in my narrative. When I entered the playroom, I found Cecilia quietly reading, and not paying the slightest attention to the storm; she was of far less nervous and excitable disposition than I was, and partly for this reason was my father's favourite, who used to say: 'Cecilia is so self-contained; she is what I call a capable girl.' I imagine he considered me a very incapable specimen of my sex; however, this troubled me but little then. Cecilia was
the elder by three years, but of course you are aware of that fact.

'Where have you been, Victoria?' she asked rather laughingly.

When I told her of how I had seen Cain Waite, she evinced but slight interest. 'I have heard papa mention his name,' she said.

'Oh, have you,' I exclaimed eagerly, 'and what did he say about him—does he know him?'

'Know him,' repeated Cecilia haughtily, 'one does not talk about "knowing" a common person like that, I daresay papa may have spoken to him once or twice; "Cain Waite is a praiseworthy man—a very excellent man," those were the words he used.'

'Well, I heard him preach, and I think he said very ugly things,' I observed, 'all about hell fire.'

'Oh,' answered Cecilia, 'but then you are not at all religious, Victoria; you quite shocked both papa and me the other day by saying you did not care about going to church—and you know you don't always read Sunday books on Sunday as you ought.'

'That is true,' I retorted, 'but I don’t think that it is always those who like going to church who are the kindest or best; look at John the cowman, he doesn't care if the pigs and ducks have nothing to eat on Sundays; he says he has his religious “dooties” to attend to, and that they can wait till Monday.'

'It is no use arguing with a child like you, you are too silly to understand such subjects,' said Cecilia scornfully, and she once more buried her nose in her book.

Now, dear girls, I believe that I have given you our conversation almost word for word, it all comes back to me so freshly.

Meanwhile the storm was gradually abating, and I, feeling somewhat snubbed, walked over to the latticed casement, and drummed carelessly on the window-sill,
whilst I watched the parting clouds. The sky was clearing fast; there was the sound of thunder rumbling in the far distance, that was all, the rain had ceased. The room faced due west, and presently it was flooded with light from the brilliant golden rays of the setting sun, which was banked up on a mass of splendour in roseate and mauve tints; the evening glory upon which one never tires of gazing, and which gives one thoughts of Heaven. I looked across at my sister, and till then, I had never realised how completely beautiful she was. The soft, shimmering radiance enveloped her as in a shining mist, causing her to appear almost unearthly and ethereal. Her Rubens' red hair shone and glowed like fire; her fine skin was shown up in all its dazzling whiteness and fairness: she turned her head, and I thought as she fixed her large liquid hazel eyes on me that they were lovely indeed, and that one must forgive that queer proud temper on account of her great beauty; I took her in at a glance and noticed every point; the dark brows and lashes, the short upper lip, the perfectly chiselled nose and mouth. And you have often heard, my dears, of the handsome Cecilia Pyecroft, your great-aunt; and how she was the belle of the County, and what a graceful figure she possessed.

But to return to my story. Just as I was lost in admiration of my sister's charms, the door opened and my mother entered. She looked worn and ill, and it pained me to see her sad face. I ran up to her and threw my arms round her neck, and then I remember Cecilia said something about Cain Waite, and my mother replied, 'she didn't think he was a nice man,' and then I asked her where he lived, and she said: 'Oh, ten miles off—but he comes round here sometimes,' and then I confided in her, and saying I had seen and heard him, begged her to tell me, if what he had said was the truth.

'My dear, we know so little,' she answered, 'but don't
worry your little head about such things, I can’t believe them; God is very good, always trust Him and do your best, then you will be all right, that is what I think. And she kissed me.

‘Victoria is so babyish, she can’t understand anything, and she asks such ridiculous, absurd questions,’ remarked the wise Cecilia.

‘Yes, but you see you are older, Cecilia, and you just take things as they are, and Victoria wants so much to know the reasons of things,’ said my mother kindly, and added, ‘Now, you are both good little girls, so be quick, change your shoes, and get some roses from the garden and give them to Mrs Wilkins for the drawing-room. Mrs Wilkins was the maid-housekeeper who had been with my mother ever since she was married.

After this day, I can’t remember anything particular that was said or done for a long time. Nothing stands out alone; everything seems rather blurred and indistinct till I was about twelve years old, and then I saw Cain Waite once more. He was strolling round the garden with my father, who appeared to be in earnest conversation with him, and I kept well out of the way, for I never at any time ventured near my father unless he called me, for otherwise he would scowl at me as if I were an intruder. Once I recollect that he said: ‘Why do you stand staring like that; you have such uncanny, piercing grey eyes for a child. Is there anything peculiar about me, that you look me through and through so oddly? Go and play with your dolls.’ And half to himself, I heard him say, for my ears were unusually sharp: ‘Precious ugly child she is, and so weird and unearthly-looking; gives one the creeps.’
CHAPTER II

On the evening of the day on which I saw Cain Waite, when mamma came up after dinner to bid me good-bye and kiss me according to her wont, as I lay in bed in the old night nursery, I noticed that she was crying. When she had gone down again, Cecilia appeared, as was her custom also before retiring; her room opened out of mine, so she had to pass through it to reach hers. I asked her what was the matter with mother, and she told me that she and papa had been having an animated discussion about Cain Waite, and that to mamma's extreme annoyance, papa had invited him to come and preach in the long library as often as he liked—every Saturday afternoon, in fact, if he could manage it. All the servants were to be present, and papa expected that mamma and we girls should attend also, and papa meant to pay him for his trouble.

'But how dreadful!' I exclaimed.

'How can you be so wicked, Victoria?' retorted Cecilia. 'As papa says, we ought to esteem it a favour that we are so blessed. You should have been a heathen, I really think!'

'Look here, Cecilia,' said I mischievously, 'I always have heard that savages are very fond of feathers and beads, now you always put on your best necklace when you have a chance of showing it.'
'What has that got to do with religion, I should like to know?' replied Cecilia, with heat.

'I'm sure I can't explain,' I said, 'only that I wondered if you had a little bit of the heathen savage in your composition too.'

'No, indeed, I haven't got an ugly yellow skin like yours!' and her cheeks flamed.

I longed to ask her why mamma was so upset about Cain Waite—as after all it didn't much matter—but Cecilia was very angry, and flounced out of the room, and I knew it would not be the least good asking her in her present mood.

Saturday afternoon arrived at last, and with it Cain Waite. I can see now the stiff bow my mother gave him as she entered the long library with Cecilia and me, for there he was standing behind a table, on which were placed the Family Bible and a glass of water; by his side was papa. A bell was rung, and in walked the majestic Mrs Wilkins clad in rustling black silk, followed by a troop of domestics, for our establishment was a large one. The butler, Mears, looked as if he had swallowed six pokers; the first footman had his mouth drawn down in a comic way, which I had never before noticed—I expected he was trying to look reverent and grave; as for the second one, a mere boy, he grinned inanely as he held the door open for his fellow-servants to enter. The cook looked stolidly complacent, and the scullery-maid kept wriggling about, and evidently did not know what to do with her hands; and in the most solemn and terrible part of Cain's harangue, I saw William, the second footman, give her a nudge, whereat she looked at him out of the corners of her eyes and blushed furiously.

Cain ranted away and hurled invectives at our heads in the same fashion as I had already heard him. For a whole hour we were obliged to sit patiently there, and after-
wards we had to listen to his prayers for a good twenty minutes; I say 'listen' advisedly, for I certainly did not join in them, and doubt much whether all the others did. However, I cannot tell; the prayers partook largely of the nature of curses hurled at all enemies of the 'true faith'; and I imagine that the Roman Catholics, the high Church party, the Jews, Turks, infidels and heretics would have had a real bad time of it, if to Cain had been entrusted the general arrangement of mundane affairs.

At length the fearful meeting was over, and the servants marched out of the room, headed again by Mrs Wilkins. Prompted by her usual good breeding, my mother advanced towards Cain Waite, and inquired 'what refreshments he would prefer'; he replied, with the churlish manners of a thorough boor, hands in pockets, with the evident desire of giving himself importance, 'that he would take a little hot whisky and water and some bread and cheese.' His wants were attended to, and I overheard the butler say afterwards to the first footman, when they were clearing the things away—for with a child's curiosity I had peered into the room later:

'By Jove, if the minister hasn't nearly emptied the decanter.'

'Those coves are mostly good hands at "Speerits,"' replied James sententiously. 'Between you and me, Mr Mears,' he began mysteriously, then looking round he saw me, and stopped abruptly.

'Has Cain Waite gone?' I inquired of the butler.

'Can't say, Miss Victoria, he went to the stables with your papa,' he answered.

I then ran quickly upstairs to the schoolroom, where I found Cecilia endeavouring to manufacture some very artificial-looking wax flowers, and Miss Bacon dozing peacefully in an arm-chair, with her handkerchief over her head to keep off the flies. She awoke as I entered.
'You never came down to hear Cain Waite, Miss Bacon,' I remarked.

'No, I have had a severe headache during the whole afternoon, which I believe was partly caused by that noise you made with the concertina before luncheon,' said Miss Bacon in an aggrieved tone of voice, and in the slow, measured way in which she always spoke.

'I am very sorry,' I answered, 'but I do want to learn it, it amuses me so.'

'You will never master it alone, and I think, dear, you should consider the feelings of others; I always did suffer from nerves,' and the governess sighed in a genteel manner.

'I am rather surprised that papa makes quite so much of Cain Waite,' observed Cecilia. 'Of course he is a very good man, but then he isn’t papa’s equal, and when you come to think the Pyecrofts are descended from the Sea-Kings,' she continued half jestingly, but not altogether, for Cecilia was arrogant. Poor Cecilia!

'But you have no right to comment upon your papa’s actions,' said Miss Bacon. 'Girls had far more dutiful respect for their parents in my time, and, besides, you always seem to think that your family is better than other people’s; you forget, for instance, that mine is descended from the Great Roger Bacon in a direct line, without a bar sinister, and that is more than most can say!' and she sniffed with pride, like an old war-horse, with her nose in the air. 'I mean,' she added, 'that no one can accuse me of giving myself airs, or of looking down upon those who have the misfortune to be born in a lower station of life; now, when Mrs Wilkins comes in sometimes after supper for a chat, I am always pleased to see her, or even Buxton.'

'Well,' I said, 'Mrs Wilkins is not common; her father was a stationer, who knew five languages; and as for Martha, her father was very respectable—he was head
gardener for years at Lord Digswell's; but why will you call Martha 'Buxton,' Miss Bacon?

'Because,' replied she stiffly, 'I do not consider it proper to address or speak of an upper servant like your nurse, and of her mature age—the oldest person in the household—by her Christian name; I have heard your mamma call her Buxton, and the servants do the same, and I think it is most uncourteous, not to say rude, of you to say 'Martha.'

'I only know that I can't and won't alter that habit, and Martha would be mortally hurt and offended if I did,' I retorted, with feelings of annoyance at the lady's punctiliousness; then a funny notion came into my little pate. 'Talking of reasons for pride, Miss Bacon,' and I tossed up my head disdainfully, 'surely I ought to be vain-glorious, considering I was named after the Princess Victoria' (two years later she was Queen), 'because I came into the world a few short years after she did, I suppose!'

'You might, with advantage, possess a little more dignity, Victoria,' remarked the instructress, 'but let us hope it may come,' and she raised her eyes towards the ceiling with fervour.

Looking out of the window, I espied my father walking arm-in-arm with Cain; this was even too much for me. I uttered an exclamation.

'What is it?' inquired Cecilia, and even Miss Bacon's curiosity being aroused, both rose from their seats and gazed out also. I believe I had thrown up my arms in the excitement of my astonishment.

'I declare I never would have believed such a thing could be possible; how papa can,' said my sister. And although Miss Bacon was too diplomatic to say one word, she could not help shaking her head ominously, as she returned to her arm-chair and her fly-protector!

The weeks passed swiftly away, and Cain Waite's visits became very frequent. Time after time were we
all compelled to assemble in the long library, and Miss Bacon attended with the rest; although I am certain she only did so out of policy. The same might be said of Mrs Wilkins, for I am positive that she simply detested Cain and his doctrines. I used constantly to be in the room whilst she was assisting my mother to dress, and whilst she brushed out her lovely long hair, and they usually conversed in low tones, and I often heard mamma speak of Cain as 'a horrid old bore, a dreadful nuisance, that it made her feel positively ill to listen to him, that she couldn't bear the sight of him,' etc., and later on she even said before me that Cain, 'embrothered her life, and made it more wretched than it was formerly.

At this, Mrs Wilkins looked very sad and grave; she was so devoted to my dear mother, that it was enough for a person to be obnoxious in any way to mamma, for her to dislike that person also. I learnt, besides, that papa had been very much disturbed respecting the state of his soul, and that Cain's ministrations gave him wonderful peace of mind (although I could see they did not improve his temper); and it appeared that my father felt certain that in allowing his religious thoughts and ideas to be led by Cain, he 'should be saved' as a brand from the burning.

In the meantime he was harsher and more overbearing in his manner towards my dear mother than before (why she ever married him must for ever remain a mystery to me), and I am aware that he was then constantly worrying her about the state of her soul, and telling her that unless she repented, she would never reach heaven. What mamma, of all people, could have to repent about, I am sure she herself could not tell, for if ever there was an angel upon this earth, it was she.

But the most dreadful trial of all came upon her later, and I was too young at the time to comprehend its complete meaning; but I saw and heard enough even then
to fill me with horror, and when I was older I learnt the complete and full details of the whole occurrence. You know what a lovely and attractive woman my mother was; the portrait in the drawing-room can give you but a faint idea of her charms; certainly some people thought she looked too delicate for real beauty. In truth, as far as I can remember, she always appeared as if the least breath of wind would blow her away—there was such an air of refinement and purity about her. After I was grown up it was said that I resembled her a good deal, but I cannot see how that can be, for I was never really pretty, although I was tall and graceful; it may possibly have been in the expression that persons found a likeness.

But to return to my tale. Cain was nothing better than a fiend incarnate; he conceived a guilty passion for my mother, which he degraded by the name of ‘love,’ and when he knew papa was out of the way (for he used to take long rides, and shoot and hunt in the winter), he would come to the house, force his way into mamma’s presence, and pester her with his loathsome attentions. He actually took rooms in a cottage near, and let his own farm, so as to be close to the object of his attraction. As for his own unfortunate wife, he made a complete drudge of her, and I believe he treated her so abominably that she returned to her parents; she was his inferior as to education I heard, but none of us ever saw her.

The wretch used to prowl round the place at all hours. One afternoon in the autumn, I was just going out, and as I had to pass the boudoir door on my way down the stairs, I thought I could look in and see mamma first. The boudoir opened into a curious octagon room, where my mother kept all her favourite books, and she loved to sit tranquilly there with her little King Charles spaniel, ‘Puck’; there was a heavy portiere of fine old tapestry which divided the two rooms. When I reached the
threshold of the boudoir I knew that something was wrong, that dreadful Cain Waite was in the next room with mamma, and he would not go; I heard his voice, and then hers expostulating; at first I did not catch what he said.

‘I beg of you to leave me,’ these were the words which mamma constantly repeated. I could not move, my feet seemed fixed to the spot, and no scruples of conscience assailed me as to my position of eavesdropper. My only feeling was one of ‘danger,’ as if something terrible were looming over mamma—a terror in the shape of Cain Waite, for I knew she looked upon him with horror, and he inspired me with the same sentiment—the repulsion of which one is sensible at the near approach of some shiny and venomous serpent.

Presently he raised his tones: ‘Beware; you have tried me beyond human endurance, even though I am a man of Faith,’ he said, evidently in a great rage, for his voice sounded thick and trembling: ‘you shall yet live to remember the day you have utterly scorned and reviled Cain Waite; I have borne this treatment patiently for months, but now I perceive that nothing will turn your coldness and dislike to “love,” and the last word was pronounced in a way which so sickened me, that it was all I could do to contain myself.

‘Go,’ reiterated my mother, as if she could bear the strain on her nerves no longer.

‘Go,’ like an awful echo he hissed between his teeth, for every fibre of my being was on the alert, and I knew, I feel sure I knew—so acute were my senses in that awful moment—how he looked. ‘Go, yes I will go, but you, madam, shall rue this hour; I will make your life a living hell.’

I heard him move nearer to the portière, and just in the nick of time, I crouched down behind the sofa, and he came out, his face livid and distorted with rage and
unsatisfied passion, and passing quickly through the door, tore down the stairs like one possessed. Then I emerged from my ambuscade, and entered the octagon room.

I shall never forget mamma’s appearance. She was as white as a sheet, and looked completely scared; she was standing in the centre of the room, and both her hands were raised to her head as if to prevent it from breaking in two, doubtless the rush of terrifying and miserable thoughts which assailed her now were driving her almost to frenzy, and the effort to keep calm during that hideous scene told upon her and broke her down, for she was by no means a strong woman. At first, she hardly seemed as if she noticed me; then as I remained opposite her, quiet as a mouse, with my eyes fixed on her in sorrowful sympathy, a sweet but sad smile illumined her countenance, and advancing towards me, she folded me in her arms. I think it did not strike her that I had overheard anything, but I was too frank to leave her under this impression; besides, I was so impulsive that in or out of season I must needs give vent to my thoughts, or they would have suffocated me, I fully believe, and I am ashamed to say, dears, that this idiosyncrasy has lasted till now—perhaps you may have observed it occasionally? But to return.

‘Mamma,’ I began, without the slightest hesitation: ‘I was coming to see you, and on reaching the boudoir I overheard the end of your conversation with Cain Waite; I really couldn’t help remaining there to listen, for I felt too frightened to move; you kept on telling him to go, and he wouldn’t, and he seemed so angry that—’

‘Don’t speak of him to me,’ interrupted my mother, ‘I cannot bear it;’ and she shivered. ‘You are so sympathetic, Victoria, but I cannot confide in you, for you are not old enough to be told about such things as these—as it is, I only trust that your innocent mind may
not have been poisoned already, by the morbid nonsense which has reached it, from the lips of that despicable man; I beseech you, Victoria, if you love me, to endeavour to forget what he said.' And then she threw herself face downwards upon the sofa, and wept as if her heart would break.

I did my best to console her, but how futile are the efforts of a child, in such a case as this. (I know that by-and-by she grew calmer and almost like her usual self, but that neither she nor I alluded more to the painful subject which had caused her to be so upset.)

About five or six days after this episode, I encountered Cain Waite in the orchard; it was impossible to avoid him.

With a jaunty air, he observed; 'Sorry I have no hand to offer, Miss Victoria, but both are full, as you will perceive.' In truth in one hand he held a Testament, and in the other a juicy apple, out of which he had already taken one or two bites.

By this time I was accustomed to his impudence, for as my father had chosen to patronise him in the way he did, Cain had placed himself on a perfect equality with us all; we were compelled to receive him at any meal at which he elected to put in an appearance, and he would most impudently send word by the butler to my mother, 'that he was coming to dine to-night.' This no doubt was purposely to annoy her, as he knew it must, for he was well aware that my father expected her to be civility itself to him, and to smile on him with her most gracious smiles. But with regard to papa's wishes about mamma's demeanour towards Cain, there was soon to be a change. Before this change, papa had constantly taken mamma to task for the want of warmth displayed in her manner to his friend, and for the all too palpable lack of interest she evinced either in him or his conversation—of course I only knew this much later.
But I meant to relate a little more about my chance meeting with this hateful man.

'I think we ought to do a little Scripture reading together,' said he, grinning at me hideously.

'No, thank you, Mr Waite; Miss Bacon gives me a Scripture lesson on Sundays,' I replied stiffly, as I turned on my heel.

'And does my little madam give herself airs like her mamma?' he sneered after me. 'Do you know the saying that "Pride shall have a fall?"'

'Do you know the one about wolves in sheep's clothing, Mr Waite?' I retorted, looking back at him over my shoulder.

The smug and puffed-up expression on his face vanished, and was replaced by the most savage and diabolical transformation in aspect that it has ever been my unfortunate lot to behold; his eyes were simply murderous in their wicked glare. I gazed at him for a second, trembling with mingled horror and disgust, and then made off as fast as I could, delighted to be free of his unwholesome presence. Little did I imagine how treacherously he would behave.

It appears (I did not know this then) that Cain soon after he had so grossly insulted my dear mother, began to throw out hints and innuendos about the condition of her mind to my father. Naturally he first endeavoured to discover how far he might go, and so sent out a few advance feelers, such as slight remarks which might mean nothing, and that could be turned and twisted at pleasure, if they were not well received. However, so strangely infatuated was my father with this villain, that he was ready to swallow anything that he chose to fabricate. Cain therefore speedily ceased to discreetly cover up and veil his meanings, and proceeded to open speech. Oh, the shameful, wicked lies that he invented, and which surely no one but my father, who was so
deluded, would have credited. Also, dear girls, papa never can have truly loved mamma, or his affection could never have died in the way it did.

How dreadful it is to be obliged to speak of one's parent in such a way, but you know he was really cold and hard-hearted then, or he could not have treated mamma as he did. He changed when it was too late to do poor mamma any good. It makes me sigh; I can't bear to think of it all, although, thank Heaven, it is all past now!

What did Cain say, you ask me? He did his best to make my father think that dear mamma's mind was unhinged, that she was suffering from incipient mania. He whispered into his ear that although so cold in her manner towards himself before papa's face, behind his back she was very different; that, in fact, she was dying of love for him, Cain, and therefore he avoided her society (being an honourable man), as much as possible. And my father believed him; he actually believed those base, foul lies, instead of rounding upon him and accusing him of being the unprincipled, unmitigated scoundrel that he was. Yes; instead of kicking him out of the place, with 'liar' written and pasted on his back, he patted him metaphorically on the back instead, and began watching poor mother as a cat would a mouse, and seeing nought but coldness and distance in her intercourse with Cain, with his ideas all distorted, his brain all set on fire by Cain's horrible insinuations, he believed that she was acting a part and shamming; and at length he taxed her with nourishing an undue regard for that fiend in human shape. There was a fearful scene. Naturally my mother either denied the imputation or scorned to do so, thinking that papa must be mad; that he called her 'double-faced' I know, because that came out later; and that mamma fainted dead
away afterwards, I also know, and Mrs Wilkins said that it was quite an hour before she revived.

Lately mamma had grown very silent in papa's company, and no wonder; and this, in addition to Cain's falsehoods, gave him cause for thinking that her head was not quite right, because he looked at things from a wrong point of view himself, his own mind surely being at the time unbalanced, or Cain could never have obtained such influence over him, for my father was always considered to be a man of great determination of character, although in this one case he showed himself to be the very reverse.

It is most distasteful to me to be compelled to relate all this, because I do so dislike to write about wickedness. I always consider that bad people have something abnormal in their compositions, and the doctrine of the inborn depravity of the human race finds no favour in my eyes. I believe in inborn goodness, in the pure spirit, a spark of divinity enshrined for a time in a human physical body, and if a person has any grave faults, well, I can't help shuddering, but I shouldn't, because I think that poor being's spirit can't have room enough to expand or exert itself. Something must have gone wrong at birth, and in the next world all will be made right in time, and the false mirage, for what can it be else that affects a divine spirit? will clear away.
CHAPTER III

I have never yet given you much information respecting the manner of our education, so I will now enlighten you a little upon this point. In my opinion we girls were not properly educated at all. Our lessons were carried on in the most desultory way, and we were just as often let off them altogether as not; it entirely depended on what sort of mood Miss Bacon happened to be in at the time,—a languid, lazy one, or the reverse.

You may be surprised to hear this, but the reason was that my father had very odd notions as to the amount and kind of knowledge which should be imparted to the youthful feminine mind. According to his ideas, needlework and housekeeping, including accounts, were all-sufficient, and he regarded the other branches of learning as unnecessary and useless extras. My mother was permitted to have but little voice in the matter; she was quite unaccustomed to assert herself, or to insist upon having her proper place accorded to her, which was a terrible pity, as had she done so, it would have been better for herself and for us.

Miss Bacon thoroughly coincided in my father's views; she was naturally phlegmatic, and only too delighted to be able to jog along in an easy manner, without any undue exertion. Papa had actually told her 'that the less she taught us the better he would be pleased, as he did not wish us to grow into 'tiresome, priggish blue-stock-
ings;” that so long as we could order a tidy dinner and exercise proper economy in expenditure, it was all that he asked, or that was required for young gentlewomen in our position.' Consequently, our governess took him at his word. In a measure, this mode of non-education was excellent for us, and far better than the cramming system now so much in vogue, when health is often permanently injured from over-pressure, during the very years when care, and plenty of recreation and rest are required. Cecilia and I grew up as strong and as vigorous as young ponies, although we were decidedly rather deficient in book learning.

Still we were not altogether so grossly ignorant as may be imagined, for we were intelligent, and managed to pick up a good deal from general observation and from reading. Cecilia had more of a literary turn of mind than I. Roaming about the grounds, watching the birds and squirrels, assisting in the hay-field and hindering the cook in the kitchen, were all pastimes which were more in my line. And so Miss Bacon, who was not a particularly erudite person, instead of being obliged to coach herself up in all kinds of subjects in order to impart the pith of them to us, used to concoct wonderful and frightful articles of dress and millinery during school hours,—that is to say, when she wasn't slumbering peacefully, and, I regret to add, snoring!

And now to return to Cain. I always fear that my unlucky and impetuous retort about the ‘Wolves versus Sheep,’ did a great deal of harm, and helped to fan this villain's feelings of revenge towards poor mamma, for he may possibly have imagined that, child as I was, she might have told me something about his conduct, or that she had confided in Cecilia, who had let slip part of the story in an unguarded moment. Be this as it may, there is no doubt that I made a fatal mistake in giving vent to my thoughts in this manner, for his worst in-
intentions were put into practice after that sally, and his most spiteful actions seem to date from then.

Following close upon the scene, in which my father upbraided my mother, was another, in which he informed her that it was imperative that she should go away for change of air; that her mind required bracing as well as her body, and that he had engaged a charming lady nurse to accompany her. He said he was acting on the advice given him by a famous follower of Galen, which was true enough. But who prompted my father to take this step? It was Cain Waite, and the nurse, if not in his pay, was a creature of his, who served his interests from some ulterior motives.

Of this, of course, my father was not aware; he allowed himself to become the dupe of this unscrupulous knave, who blinded him with a show of religious piety, so that papa believed him to be a morally upright man.

The physician who made a speciality of such cases as mamma's assured my father that the only cure for my mother was complete isolation; that she must be entirely removed from her family and present surroundings, so that not a trace of them should be left to annoy her. He saw her only once, and said that he considered it absolutely unnecessary for him to visit her again, unless she herself desired it, or that her condition became more grave, as he understood exactly what ailed her, and that hers was a very mild case, and by no means an exceptional one,—indeed, that it was very common with ladies who had not sufficient occupation to prevent them from constantly dwelling upon themselves and their imaginary troubles. What a shameful lie! Fancy speaking so of mamma, who was always busy.

That physician was, I knew later, a very unreliable person, who hurried over his patients without allowing himself time to discover what was the matter with them. His name was brought before the public some years after
in a disgraceful manner. He stood as a criminal at the bar, and was sentenced to two years imprisonment; but at the time he prescribed for dear mamma, he ranked highly in the profession, although I believe some amongst his fraternity distrusted him entirely and didn’t care to meet him.

Poor mamma objected much to being sent away with an utter stranger; she told papa that she did not wish to go, and that there was nothing wrong with her; but he persisted that she must go, and that nearly all the invalids who suffered from the same malady as herself declared that they enjoyed robust health, and that they required no change of scene. This idea, he added, as well as others equally strange, were part of the complaint, and caused by her drooping, vapourish condition. And so mamma, who was doubtless too delicate and unnerved to fight her own battles without a soul to help her or to stand by her, consented and submitted to this outrageous mandate.

I wonder now how Cecilia, who was nearly sixteen, did not prevent this miserable plan of Cain’s for the banishment of my mother from all that was dear to her, from being carried into execution. I don’t mean that Cecilia or any one else could have known that it was a dark plot hatched by that bad man, but surely she ought to have had enough sense and judgment to tell her that it was a most unheard-of and injudicious proceeding. Even I, at barely thirteen years of age, was sufficiently wise to feel sure it was all wrong; I said so to my sister, and also dinned into her ears over and over again, that I thought it was very unkind of papa not to allow Mrs Wilkins to accompany mamma on her visit to the sea-side. But Cecilia was so odd about it all, she simply wouldn’t see that there was anything wrong or strange in the matter; in fact, she became quite angry and huffy at last, saying: ‘That I always wanted to set myself up as an oracle
knowing better than other people; that for her part, she felt certain it would be much better for mamma to go away and have a thorough rest from housekeeping, and that she had heard Mr Waite remark to papa, that "mamma said she was simply sick of ordering dinners, and that papa was so dreadfully particular that she wished he would get a chef."

'Oh,' I exclaimed—my cheeks, I feel certain, flaming with righteous indignation—'how impertinent of Cain Waite to repeat such a thing; I don't believe mamma ever said it either, not for a single moment.'

'Well,' retorted Cecilia, 'you need not look like a live turkey-cock over it; for myself, I fail to perceive where the impertinence comes in, and it is not very civil of you to insinuate that Mr Waite tells lies.'

'But don't you know how mamma dislikes him—he is a horrid man; don't you remember what I told you about him that day in the octagon room?' I said, in a tone of remonstrance and indignation. (I had confided in her, because I thought it wiser to do so.)

'Yes, I know,' replied Cecilia calmly, looking as cool as a cucumber, 'but you exaggerate so dreadfully—papa and Miss Bacon both say so; and, besides, how could you hear distinctly through that thick portière; more shame to you for listening; such a dishonourable thing to do. You imagined half, you may be sure, and mamma has been perfectly unstrung and overwrought lately. I don't believe she understood Mr Waite exactly; besides, she never told you what he said, and I repeat that any one with eyes can see that mamma is very different from what she was formerly.'

'You are really enough to try the patience of a saint, Cecilia; can't you understand that mamma is different because she is so worried. I know she can't bear Cain Waite for one thing; if he didn't come so often she would be better; you know that as well as I do.'
‘No, I don’t!’ returned Cecilia doggedly, ‘and I am not going to take the trouble to argue with a chit like you any more, as if papa didn’t know what he was about; he talked to me for about an hour this morning, and told me all the doctor had said, and he even asked my advice (and she curled up her pretty little nose with pride) about mother; he says she doesn’t eat enough, and desired me to tell Armstrong (the cook) to make her some good nourishing chicken broth; so there.’

‘You are hopeless, Cecilia,’ I responded.

‘And you are an ignorant, tiresome, conceited little thing,’ she retorted, as she walked away with a dignified gait, leaving me to my own thoughts, which were far from happy ones.
CHAPTER IV

At last the day arrived on which mamma was to leave us for Hayling Island; it was only about ten or twelve miles from our place, and not far from Havant, close to which town was situated the small farm belonging to Cain Waite, but where, as already stated, he dwelt no longer. Mamma and her nurse (this woman had arrived on the previous evening) were to travel by road in a close carriage with postilions as far as Havant, and then cross the ferry which divided the lovely Isle of Hayling from the mainland. (At the present time there is a fine connecting-bridge, and travellers are swiftly carried to the island behind the iron horse, as the line branches off at Havant, and the train goes straight to its destination at South Hayling.)

The face of that nurse! It haunts me still. I even behold it sometimes in dreams. You look alarmed, dearies. No doubt horror was depicted on my countenance; the tremor which passed through my frame at the mere thought of that hateful visage was contagious, I believe, and has affected you! I feel quite remorseful. You say you don’t mind, that were it not all so fraught with pain to me, and that you yourselves regret that members of our family should have been so cruelly treated—well, that you would call it a simply delicious story, that the actors in it seem so real, that you could almost see them!

Alas, yes, they lived and moved; it is unfortunately
too true. Picture to yourselves now a small squat woman,
thick-set and enormously stout and unwieldy; with a
pasty face as round as a full moon, and flaxen-haired. Look at the coarse, purse-shaped mouth, the wicked
hooked nose, like the beak of a bird of prey, and the evil­
looking eyes, greenish in tint and sinister in expression,
then tell me if you can imagine my feelings when I first
gazed upon the embodiment of such ill-favoured features
and such grossness of figure—and this monster would be
the sole companion of my dear mother; think!

It was only on the morning of mamma's departure that
I first saw this woman; she entered the front hall carrying
some shawls and a bag; she was dressed from top to
toe in sombre funereal black; bonnet, cloak and gown,
without the faintest relieving touch of white. Mamma
was ready for her journey and waiting in the drawing­
room with Cecilia and me, and the door being wide open,
I, who stood exactly facing it, could command a perfect
view of the front staircase, down which the nurse slowly
and laboriously descended, afterwards placing herself ex­
actly within my range of vision in the vestibule. I gazed
at her with scrutiny, experiencing meanwhile a sensation
of the intensest aversion towards her disagreeable person­
ality.

Mamma sat quietly on the sofa, apparently in a very
languid condition; she appeared to me to be dazed.

'Do you like her?' I whispered, inclining my head in
the direction of my bête noire.

'I haven't had time to think about it, dear,' she returned
in a pre-occupied way. 'Of course I should have preferred
to have taken Mrs Wilkins with me—but then who would
have looked after the servants?'

'But,' I exclaimed, 'Cecilia or Miss Bacon could have
done that; besides, the cook is quite honest, she would
have managed all right, I feel sure.'

'No, oh no,' she replied, in a less abstracted manner,
'your papa said one would never be certain who was in or out of the house, or if the back door was kept shut, unless Wilkins remained.'

'What nonsense,' I said, with rising indignation, 'as if it mattered either. Where your comfort was concerned, I am quite surprised that papa should have hesitated for a moment as to the advisability of having Mrs Wilkins with you.'

'Hush, hush, Victoria,' answered my mother. 'You are too impulsive; your papa has been most considerate, and has arranged everything for me in the most comfortable way possible; I have not had to exert myself or tire myself in troubling about the slightest thing.'

'Victoria is most extraordinary,' observed Cecilia, not very pleasantly, 'she always tries to make difficulties, or fishes for grievances. Dear mamma' — and she turned towards my mother—'how much stronger and better you will be altogether after this nice change!'

For the time I had forgotten the nurse. I thought of her once more, and glancing at her, found to my astonishment that she was evidently watching me, and doubtless had been listening to our conversation, for she had approached nearer, and a most hateful smile, or rather grin of amusement, played round her thick, wide lips, while there was a vicious gleam in her nasty eyes. I turned away with a feeling of greater repulsion than before.

'Mamma,' I whispered, for I did not wish Cecilia to hear: 'I can't bear the face of your nurse, there is something in it that repels me. Promise me,' and I laid my hand with pressure on her arm, 'promise me to write very soon, and tell me how you get on with her.'

'Silly child,' replied mamma in her low tones; 'for ever carried away by your excited imagination. Do you fancy yourself to be a second Lavater, an authority on physiognomy?' and she laughed; but the laugh was
spasmodic and mirthless, even forced, I thought. ‘But I will write as quickly as possible—will that satisfy you, little suspicious monkey? You shall hear about my “keeper,” with whom I am sure to agree; don’t you think so?’ She laughed again nervously.

As she pronounced the horrid word ‘keeper,’ I started; there was something so gruesome and uncanny in the very mention of it; did it not infer that mamma was a trifle insane? even in joke it was painful; besides, papa and Cecilia did think she wasn’t quite herself; I knew they did. Oh! what a sickening thought,—and dear mamma, had she any slight half-informed notion of what was in their minds, I wondered.

Just then there was the sound of wheels on the gravel, and the next instant Mears appeared to announce that the carriage was at the door. Then mamma rose and embraced Cecilia and me fondly, whilst we all shed tears. Mrs Wilkins came forward to bid her an affectionate farewell, and papa just came out of his study in time to wish mamma a pleasant journey, peaceful, happy sojourn, and a healthful return. He imprinted a hasty peck of a kiss upon her forehead, and then he assisted her into the carriage; the nurse followed. A few final words were spoken, and parting injunctions given by us to our beloved mother to take care of herself, etc. The luggage was already piled on the roof of the vehicle; the postilions started the four business-like roadsters, which set off at a good steady pace.

We waved our handkerchiefs frantically, and mamma did the same from the window of the carriage. There was a big stifling lump in my throat, and all our eyes were wet, excepting papa’s (in fact, I did not cease weeping for an hour after she left). I cannot forget, too, that the last impression engraved upon my mind as the wheels whirled dear mamma away, was of an unpleasant disquieting nature, for the nurse was grinning at me, and
continued to do so in a sort of mocking way, I fancied, until distance obscured the detestable vision from my sight.

A week passed, and I, at any rate, had received no news of my mother. Once or twice already I had inquired of Cecilia if mamma had written to her, and each time, the reply was a curt 'No.' I even hazarded the same question of papa, who replied, 'I have heard that your mother is going on very well,' and his manner was so grimly chilling that it did not invite me to pursue the subject, although I was dying to do so. However, after the lapse of ten days, I could endure the suspense no longer, and driving Cecilia into a corner, I cross-examined her like an inquisitor, assuring her, besides, that I felt positive that something was being hidden from me, and that it was a shame that I should be left in ignorance of anything which concerned mamma.

And so the secret came out. It appeared that one of the most stringent conditions of the isolation system was, that the patient should not communicate with friends, as a disturbing element might thus gain ingress to the mind, upset the nerves, and retard recovery.

'Why did you not tell me of this sooner?' I asked; 'for what reason am I to be treated like an infant or an idiot? In two months I shall be thirteen!'

'I only knew of it myself four or five days after mamma left, and then papa told me not to tell you unless I was obliged, as you were such a little sieve, and he didn't want the whole world to know about his affairs; he said it would impair our prospects if people knew that mother wasn't quite right.'

'How dare you say that mamma isn't quite right,' I cried in real anger. 'Her mind is as sound as yours or mine, and for my part I think it is simply disgraceful that she should not be allowed to write, and in fact be treated as if she were a lunatic.'
'Look here, Victoria, do you really believe that you have a wiser head than either papa or Dr—-? You are making a regular fool of yourself, and if people said that your brain was slightly affected, I could not blame them!' Cecilia spoke with confident assurance, but not in such an offended tone as was her usual custom when I contradicted her.

'Yes,' I responded significantly. 'It would not surprise me; if a person has any originality or is different from the common herd, he or she is pronounced “Mad as a hatter.”'

Cecilia burst out in a derisive peal of laughter.

'So you fancy yourself a genius!' she said, 'but originality and eccentricity are twin sisters, and your class of mind pertains to the latter order. I read a book on mental attributes the other day by a phrenologist, and I only wish I could tell your bumps!'

'Cecilia,' I began gently, 'if you were as devoted to mamma as I am, you would be miserable. For Heaven’s sake,' I continued emphatically, 'do tell me if you or papa have heard about her at all, and if so, what?'

'I am sure I am quite as fond of mamma as you are,' retorted my sister. 'Everything with you is on the surface, and you declaim in a grandiloquent manner like a tragedy queen, but to satisfy you, you may know that papa has heard, in fact that he hears most days from Nurse Bangs, who gives a good account of mamma on the whole. She sleeps, eats, and looks better, but the recovery will be slow otherwise, Nurse Bangs fears.'

'Recovery otherwise,' I repeated. 'What does the woman mean?'

'Well, of course, she means that it will be some time before mamma is cheerful, and—you get so unreasonably angry, Victoria, that I shan’t say the words, but you understand what they are!'
'Before she is quite right,' I said, with inward rage and outward calm, as I supplied the end of the phrase.

'Of course,' replied Cecilia, and I said no more then, feeling that it was perfectly hopeless, but I ran off to Mrs Wilkins, and 'poured my grief into her kind and sympathetic ears, caring not a rap what either papa or Cecilia might think of this proceeding on my part. It was sufficient to me to know with certainty that Mrs Wilkins adored mamma, and that she was her staunch partisan and friend, and I was sure that mamma fully reciprocated her affection. She remained perfectly silent whilst I was unburdening myself to her, and whilst I confided all my doubts respecting the nurse, and my strong convictions regarding the unwisdom of mamma's banishment. I repeated to her word for word what Cecilia had said. She became graver and graver meanwhile, and it was only when I had completely finished my narrative that she said very earnestly and impressively:

'I already had my misgivings, Miss Victoria, and all you have told me only makes me feel that I did not have them for nothing. You have such a wonderful insight into human nature, I think; you appear to see through people, and you are so sensible for your age, and then so affectionate in your ways to your dear mamma; I am sincerely attached to you, miss.'

'But what do you advise me to do, Mrs Wilkins? I wanted to write to mamma, and Cecilia would not allow me to do so. She said papa would be furious if I did such a thing, and that I would do mamma some permanent injury. As for old Bacon, she put on her spectacles, looking like an owl, and gave me a lecture on 'Dutifulness to Parents,' winding it up with saying 'that I was the most difficult pupil she had ever had the misfortune to educate, and that I caused her hair to turn grey. Now as it was like that ever since she came, I imagine she must
have found it a hard task to keep an exact calculation of
the number that appeared freshly each day owing to my
wickedness; but what shall I do, Mrs Wilkins?’

The good creature could not refrain from smiling at
my account of poor Miss Bacon’s trials, then she grew
serious, and after having remained for a few seconds in
deep thought, she said in a hushed whisper, ‘I shall go
to Hayling to-morrow and see your mamma; I mean to
take a very cunning underhand step, but I trust I may
be forgiven for it, as it is in your dear mamma’s interests,
and in order to attempt to save her from goodness knows
what! For I firmly believe she stands in peril, danger
to her reason, by being without a kindred spirit of any
sort in whom to confide; or danger to her health—for
can we tell if that woman looks after her properly?
Many is the illness and even death I have heard of, from
damp, ill-aired sheets or from unwholesome food cooked
in dirty copper-stewpans—’

‘Tell me then,’ I interrupted, wishing to bring her
back to the point; ‘how are you going to manage your
visit; shall you ask papa’s permission? And what if he
won’t give it?’

‘Fortunately, Miss Victoria, I had already begged
Mr Pyecroft to allow me two days’ holidays, as I wished
to go to London to see my brother who has returned
from Australia, where he has been farming for a time,
and your papa said that I could be spared whenever I
chose, and that I was only to let him know a little before­hand if possible; but even that would not much signify,
he added, if I could arrange that one of the upper
servants should see that things were carried on all right
during my absence, so that I intend to ask your nurse to
take my place, and I shall write a note to Mr Pyecroft,
telling him ‘that as he was so good as to say I might go
and see my brother when I like that if it suited him, I
wished to leave to-morrow, Tuesday, returning on Thurs­
day, and that Buxton would act as housekeeper during my absence.'

'And do you know mamma's address?' I inquired.

'Certainly, I do,' she replied, 'for I wrote all the labels for her trunks, according to her directions, and I thought it very strange of that Nurse Bangs to have kept on repeating the whole time whilst I was doing so. "So I have stepped into your shoes for the present, Mrs Wilkins, but never fear; I will look after your dear lady very well indeed; yes, very well indeed. And the end of the sentence she always said twice over—in fact, whenever she spoke at all it was much the same."

'A nice place, a very nice place—a very nice place,' and she would drawl it out the second time, half to herself, in a way that it made my flesh creep to hear. Terrible woman, I call her—what a size she is too, how hugely fat, I mean.'

'Yes;' and I glanced at the well set up, neat-waisted person who was addressing me; I looked upon her as quite ancient then, because to a young girl as I was, everyone over thirty seems old, and Mrs Wilkins must have been about forty.

'How I wish I might accompany you,' I exclaimed eagerly. 'I long to see for myself if that awful nurse is treating mamma as she ought; besides, it seems ages to me since mamma left; in all our lives we have never been without her before.'

'It isn't a bit of good for you to think of going with me; it is an utter impossibility, so you must resign yourself and be patient, Miss Victoria; but as soon as ever I return, I will come to you at once, and you shall hear all about your mamma, I won't disguise anything whatever from you—and now excuse me, but I think you had better go back to the schoolroom, and I must make my preparations and also write the note to your papa.'
The next day, I was by no means astonished to hear from Cecilia that Mrs Wilkins had gone off early in the morning in the dog-cart to the station, as she was going to London to see her brother. Thursday morning arrived, and we were all assembled at the breakfast table, when Mears came in with the letters; there were only two for papa. He opened the envelope of the first, and as soon as he commenced reading it, he uttered an exclamation, and turned ashen; naturally we were much concerned and inquired the reason.

'Your mother is dangerously ill,' he stammered out, 'and that shameful woman, Nurse Bangs, never let me know anything about it. Waite is coming by-and-bye, and I shall ask what he meant by recommending such a person.' And his voice sounded thick and hoarse with mingled rage and emotion.

'What is the matter with mamma, and who has written to you?' asked Cecilia, I being for the moment too overcome to speak.

'Here, take the letter,' and he pushed it across to her, half mad with the tumultuous feelings that assailed him, for I observed this, as one does sometimes when a thing strikes one forcibly; and just then it dawned upon me that he cared for mamma more than I had thought.

He rose from the table, leaving his untouched breakfast before him, and strode out of the room. As he
reached the door he paused, remarking, ‘As soon as I have seen Cain Waite, I am going off to Hayling Island, and you girls had best come too—tell Martha to pack your clothes at once;—we shall start from here at half-past one sharp.’ Usually he would have asked Miss Bacon’s permission about anything which concerned us, as he was very punctilious on that score, and invariably treated the governess with deference, but now he simply ignored her very presence, as if she were a stock or a stone; he was downright upset.

Cecilia had already perused the letter, and sat gazing vacantly before her. ‘How dreadful,’ she said, as she began to cry. I snatched up the note, and when I reached the end, I could have screamed, for these were the last words after the signature,

‘Yours most respectfully,

AMELIA WILKINS.’

P.S.—‘Pray, sir, do not delay in coming here at once with the young ladies, or it may be too late.’

My feelings, dear children, at this juncture can be better imagined than described: And Cecilia, too, was so overwhelmed with anxiety and grief, that she at first expressed no wonder at the writer being no other than the maid-housekeeper. But presently the strangeness of this fact occurred to her, and she commented upon it; and then I told her all, without keeping anything back, and she was much touched; whilst throwing her arms affectionately round my neck, she begged me to forgive her for her previous unkindness, and for her worse than foolish blindness in all that concerned mamma (these were her own words). And of course I freely forgave her, as any one with a human heart in her breast would have done, and then we talked over present affairs as quietly as the trouble we were in would permit of our doing.

Mrs Wilkins’ epistle was a very short one. She stated
‘that three days previous to her arrival at Hayling, mamma had caught a violent chill, that she was now suffering from peritonitis, and that the doctor from Havant considered her condition to be most grave.’ That was all, and this evidently had been penned hurriedly.

Miss Bacon helped to pile on the agony, by continuing every five minutes to ‘hope that we should arrive in time, as oh, dear! her own lamented mother had died from a fit of apoplexy occasioned by her having partaken too freely at supper the night before, of pork and onions, and of course, she (Miss Bacon) could not possibly get home to see her alive, as death was instantaneous.

Our instructress proved a Job’s comforter indeed, and drove Cecilia and me half wild. We got away from her as speedily as possible, and assisted Martha in putting together the few things that were indispensable for us to take.

The good nurse was most sympathetic and cheering in her consolation, as may be supposed. She begged us ‘to keep up our spirits, as these sudden illnesses constantly took a quick turn for the better, and that even while we were speaking, mamma might be on a fair road to recovery.’ So we dried our tears and endeavoured to be sanguine.

I believe that meantime papa was ‘having it out’ with Cain Waite; I learnt the chief part of what passed in that interview later, from my father’s own lips. He upbraided Cain for having recommended such a careless nurse, and Cain defended himself by saying, ‘that it was too early to judge—that doubtless she had some excellent reasons for not having mentioned mamma’s indisposition in her two last letters’ (fancy two); ‘that she had always given her previous employers complete satisfaction, and my father was too hasty at jumping at conclusions before he had investigated matters.’
I may as well mention here, that since mamma's departure, Cain Waite had not been nearly so constant a visitor, although, I believe, he did dine pretty often, in order to satisfy the cravings of his physical inner man, and to fertilise the growth of religion (according to his ideas) in my father's inner man. How papa can have looked to him as a spiritual adviser passes my comprehension; as well might he have looked for guidance and assistance in his way to heaven from a gaol bird out of Newgate, for I am sure few could possess a blacker heart than Cain Waite.

How sickening and terrible was the suspense we endured during the journey down to Hayling Island on that wretched Thursday afternoon. I say 'we,' for I am certain that papa and Cecilia shared my gloomy apprehensive thoughts; I could read what they were suffering in the expression of their features. None of us spoke much; a kind of pall of misery was over us, and a threatening impending dread of something worse to come, weighed darkly down upon our spirits and closed our lips.

At length we arrived at our destination, and had my journey been undertaken under other circumstances, I should have decidedly been pleasurably excited by the charm of the sequestered spot, so deliciously and fragrantly fresh in its arcadian beauty. The month was April, season of smiles and tears, so that spring lent an additional and vernal grace to an isle, which must surely ever be poetically sweet.

Before my eyes was stretched a green mossy expanse, which widened out until in the near distance it was met by the rippling blue sea, on which shone the sun, causing the tiny wavelets to gleam transparently, whilst the frothy foam was thrown upwards in a white glistening radiance. Dotting the soft yielding turf were clusters of fine shrubs of luxuriant growth, and emerald-tinted foliage; pretty snug-looking little thatched cottages were scattered
picturesquely about, and overhead was the clear blue canopy of the azure sky, on whose surface was scarcely to be perceived the shadow even of a fleecy cloud. Close to the shore, and surrounded by a tangled hedge, stood three detached houses of average size, on the exact site now occupied by that most comfortable hostelry, the Royal Hotel.

I have glided away from my story proper, so I will diverge still a little further before I return to it, for it is interesting to compare places one has visited and known in years long fled, with their present condition and appearance. For instance, you would find Hayling Island very different in this year of grace 1897 to what it was in the year 1836, and you would hardly recognise it, I fancy, for it is so much more populated, besides being greatly improved in many ways, although it still is a peaceful retreat, and offers an almost unknown repose to brains and eyes that have grown sick of the madding crowd, coupled with pleasant, yet not too vigorous exercise, afforded by the golf links, for those who delight in that form of recreation.

And now after having wandered away from my narrative, in perhaps not an altogether unprecedented manner, I will take up the thread once more, and continue from the point at which I dropped it. The central house of those three was the one in which mamma was residing. We entered the small garden in front of it by a green gate which led down a gravelled path, bordered on either side by well-kept grass, to the door. We rang, and Mrs Wilkins, who had doubtless been on the watch for us, answered our summons immediately. She was as white as a sheet, her whole countenance being careworn from anxiety and want of sleep. No sooner were we in the hall, or rather passage, than she turned to papa, and in low, pleading tones, thus addressed him:

'Sir, I crave your pardon for the deception I have
practised upon you—but I was driven to extremity—and indeed it is a mercy that I came.'

'Tell me quickly how Mrs Pyecroft is—and take us to her—never mind the rest; you acted rightly, I have nothing to forgive!' replied my father, with the desperate impatience of maddening suspense, as he waved her forward with a gesture.

Already we had inquired about mamma's condition, but the good woman had seemed too scared to answer. Now she recovered herself a little, and as she began to mount the stairs, followed by us three, she said: 'You are quite in time, but oh dear—how can I tell you? You must be brave, for oh, the doctor says she can't recover—and I knew it already this morning!'

It was all we could do to retain our composure. My heart felt breaking, and I am certain that papa and Cecilia were in torture. With hushed footsteps we passed into the room where poor mamma lay, and as soon as we beheld her we knew that she had, alas! not long to live. A terrible change had come over her, far too painful for me to be able to describe to you in detail; for I experience a gnawing grief in my soul when I even think of her drawn, thin face, and the eyes that had grown so large in comparison, whilst their wistful, patient and suffering expression haunts me still. She was conscious, recognising us all, but was too weak to speak—and she never spoke again. In mercy, then, let me draw a veil over the last sacred moments.

It was on that evening at sunset that my darling mother breathed her last. Let me also pass over those first bitter days of mourning in silence. I will only mention that the funeral took place quietly in the little churchyard on the island, and that you will find the grave there still in the right hand corner, headed by a plain white marble cross, on which is engraved a simple touching inscription. Poor mamma had always said that
she would not be put in the family vault at Croft, so papa respected her wishes, as he could not bury her amongst the villagers in the tiny churchyard at home. Certainly everything connected with burial is most repulsive; there is far less horror in the contemplation of cremation, and for my own part, I have every intention that my Earthly Shell shall be burned; that is to say, if my surviving near relations (you, for instance) will see that my last wishes are carried out.
CHAPTER VI

After all was over, we returned to the manor, crushed and broken down with grief. I indeed, for some time, being penetrated and overburdened with the feeling that for me, at least, joy on this earth had departed for evermore. Naturally, as is fortunately the case with all sorrows, mine became by-and-bye less prominent and all-absorbing, and instead of forcing itself upon me at all moments, and colouring my every emotion, thought and act, it drifted downwards and lay as a deep undercurrent, which, when occasionally disturbed, rushed upwards in increasing force to torment me for a short period, by reason of its usual and normal condition of calm tranquillity.

And now I will give you a full account of the reasons which induced and brought on my mother’s illness, causing premature death; (although, beloved children, I don’t believe that we either enter or leave the world by chance, but feel firmly convinced that both events are fore-known, and fore-ordained by higher powers). I shall adhere as closely as possible to the wording employed by Mrs Wilkins, for of course she was the narrator, and she related the sad story almost exactly according to the version I am giving you.

It seems that on her arrival at ‘Flint Cottage,’ she found mamma huddled up in the corner of the sitting-room, sobbing bitterly. Nurse Bangs was apparently
paying not the slightest attention to her, for she sat with her back almost completely turned to her charge, darning a pair of stockings. She started up as Mrs Wilkins entered, and after grinning at her in that terrible fashion of hers, she said: ‘What a very agreeable surprise—a very agreeable surprise,’ then she continued to grin.

I must tell you that mamma was actually in her nightgown, without either dressing-wrapper or shawl, and she kept crying out and saying, ‘that she was in agony, and could bear it no longer!’ She was far too ill to express the least astonishment at Mrs Wilkins’ sudden appearance, but the presence and voice of her faithful attendant at once exerted a beneficial influence over her, for she grew calmer and allowed herself to be taken back to bed, ‘out of which she would keep getting,’ the nurse said; and when Mrs Wilkins inquired, ‘how her lady had engendered this illness—and what was its nature,’ the nurse replied, ‘that she had caught a cold three days before, by insisting upon remaining out for more than two hours in the pouring rain without a waterproof, and in thin shoes.’

‘It’s nothing at all but a chill on the liver, and she has herself to thank for it, by being so headstrong and obstinate,’ added the gorgon. It would not, I fancy, be easy to depict the good woman’s indignation, not to say rage, at this speech. I know that she has often told me that she gave Nurse Bangs a real piece of her mind thereupon, but not half as much as she would have done, had she not been obliged to devote all her energies to looking after mamma.

My dear mother grew rather easier during the course of the evening, and the doctor (for whom Mrs Wilkins had despatched a messenger at once) arrived shortly and prescribed for her, and he assured Mrs Wilkins that my mother was suffering from acute peritonitis, and that he regretted to say he considered her to be in a most
critical condition, and that she mustn’t leave her for a moment, and had better write a letter to her husband asking him to come as soon as possible. He added that had he been sent for as soon as she felt ill he could most certainly have pulled her round, but now he did not wish to say that her recovery was an impossibility—but it was his duty to her friends to let them know that it was extremely doubtful. Mrs Wilkins wrote to my father immediately, but letters in those days took longer to reach their destination than now, and her note was only received on the next day but one.

All that night dear mamma never closed her eyes in sleep, but the pain came only in paroxysms; and during the intervals of comparative ease she talked incessantly. She was never delirious, and spoke as sensibly and as naturally as was her wont.

She confided to Mrs Wilkins that she believed Nurse Bangs to be a most unscrupulous person; that she had not seen to her comfort in any way. She would not stir from her chair if she could possibly help it; she did not trouble herself to fetch or carry anything whatever for mamma, so that she had been compelled to do nearly everything for herself (needless to be said, that Nurse Bangs was now kept out of the room). The wretch drove mamma nearly wild by her preaching. It seems that the instant after they drove off in the carriage, she asked mamma, ‘Whether she was saved and prepared to die’; and this was the strain in which she continued until she literally almost drove her to the verge of frenzy; and three days ago Nurse Bangs became dreadfully abusive. She informed mamma that she was a ‘lazy, complaining, ridiculous fool; that if she had a floor to scrub down, she would soon become less nonsensical. Did she want hot water? then she might fetch it herself; that she was as good as _her_ any day. And didn’t she know how she, mamma, had been making eyes and trying her
best to carry on with Cain Waite behind her husband's back—a nice deceitful hussy—a good-for-nothing baggage!

My mother endeavoured to stop this voluble torrent of impudence, but it was in vain. Each succeeding word she uttered seemed to infuriate the creature more than ever. She tried to escape from her, but Bangs followed her into one room and out of another, so it was hopeless to attempt to get rid of her. Her offensive phrases were interlarded in a disgusting manner with religion, and mamma felt positively sick at being forced to listen to such a mass of odious unsavouriness. What should she do? She was plagued and persecuted beyond endurance—driven to extremities.

It was a pouring wet morning, the rain came down heavily; the ground was sopping. Never mind, it was a misfortune that the weather should be so inclement, but it could not be avoided. There was but one way of delivering herself from the creature's importunities, and that was—by going out.

Mamma searched for her thick boots, but they were nowhere to be found, and she had no waterproof with her, as it was never her custom to leave the house except when fine—unless she drove. She put on her bonnet and a thin cloak, and, taking her umbrella, rushed down the stairs before Nurse Bangs could prevent it, and emerging through the house door, fled swiftly, heedless of the descending waterspouts, across the common and to the beach. There were drawn up two solitary dilapidated bathing-machines. Up the steps of one of them she climbed, and sat herself down. Pelt, pelt, fell the rain; it was impossible to keep herself dry, for her umbrella was a wretchedly inadequate one, being more of the size of a large parasol, and the drippings trickled down her back. As for the skirt of her dress, it was soon soaked through, and clung in damp folds around her feet. But she cared not—she was free from that low-bred vituperating female,
and this condition of moist discomfort was a lesser evil; and it was only when she began to feel positively ill,—her head burning like a furnace, her feet like ice, and a suffocating sensation at her heart, mingled with sharp stabs of pain which almost stopped its beating, that she was forced to leave her refuge and return to the house.

About two hours had she—who was totally unused to braving the weather—been subjected to this ordeal by water, the kind of experience which, to a fairly strong man, might result in a remarkably heavy cold in the head.

Nurse Bangs was ready to greet mamma, having heard her mount the stairs, and she stood like a stout sentinel in the doorway of the sitting-room, with the usual grin on her ugly face. ‘I trust you feel all the better for your cold bath, and that it has braced you up nicely,’ she said, as she dropped a mock curtsey. ‘What a lovely appearance you present, my charming, affected madam! Venus rising from the sea would be nowhere in comparison.’ And she laughed demoniacally and gleefully.

My mother vouchsafed no reply, feeling far too ill to be able to do battle with her tormenting adversary. She undressed and got into bed, when Nurse Bangs entered the room and remarked, ‘Oh, you idle creature—wasting the precious hours in this way. I am pretty certain that the devil himself is continually prompting you, and you do not endeavour to thrust his evil whispers from you,—lost soul. Do you hear the crackling of the everlasting fires? Do you see the lurid flames and the spirits writhing in them? They are in anguish, and by-and-by it will be your turn to join them,’ and she chuckled. ‘And Cain Waite and I—for are we not two of the Elect?’ and she cast up her gooseberry eyes to the ceiling. ‘Yes,’ continued she with unction, ‘are we not two of the Elect? And from regions of the blessed shall we look down upon you; and the misery of your eternal fate
shall be to us a cause for thanksgiving, as it will be even to the nearest relations of the damned, for it but demonstrates the justice of Providence, those who would not believe as they should, must burn for ever and ever; and besides, when the Elect above witness the pain of the Turks, heretics and infidels, they will experience a sense of the most intense pleasure and delight in thinking that they are not their companions. He, he, he, he,* and she stood shaking with laughter at my mother’s bedside.

Mamma implored Bangs to fetch her some hot tea, assuring her that she was suffering, and had no idea what ailed her.

‘It being my painful duty to have to attend upon a heathen, I will get it for you—but only in the frame of mind in which a missionary would minister to the blacks. Yes, to the blacks.’ And she went off reluctantly to perform mamma’s behest.

When she proffered the cup to the invalid, she recommenced:

‘A lady—(I suppose that’s what you call yourself)—a fine madam who hardly ever enters a place of worship—for I know you do not—don’t tell me. You ought to go on a Sunday when the Athanasian Creed is being read—ah, that’s what I delight in hearing’ (and she smacked her lips); ‘it’s the end of it that pleases me most, after it has been said that it is necessary for salvation that we should believe so and so—then when the finale comes—the winding up “everlasting fire”; this is the Catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved. Then I feel as if I could jump round and round with wild joy—yes, with wild joy,’ and she clasped her hands together, and grinned.

After having swallowed the tea, mamma felt for the moment slightly relieved, so she observed, in a rather weak voice: ‘But you have made an omission, Nurse Bangs;
although I certainly do not attend church regularly, if my memory fails me not, the sentence runs thus: “And they that have done evil shall go into everlasting fire”; not that I believe for a single moment that Saint Athanasius wrote the truth, although it was doubtless according to his lights and interpretation of the Scriptures. In my opinion, he gives no allowance for the Oriental flowery imagery of which the Bible is full to overflowing—but anyhow, you quoted wrongly, Nurse Bangs, for you forget the “evil.”

“But doesn’t it say faith all through?” shouted the nurse, as if she were speaking to a deaf person, “and “evil” is only brought in once at the tail of it, as a sort of afterthought and of no importance whatever. Belief is what is necessary; and if people—no matter how they behave—don’t “hold the faith” as we, the Elect, do (I don’t mean you, my fine madam, when I say us), they will find themselves in the wrong box—yes, in quite a wrong box.

‘And on their path
Shall burst the wrath
And deathless doom,’

She sang in a shrill, squeaky voice, whose every note was discordant. Then she paused. ‘Do you know to which hymn those sweet words I have sung to you belong?’

Mamma shook her head feebly.

‘Number 414 of those at the end of your prayer book, heathenish madam; only I have altered the first line, by singing “their” instead of “our”; here is the delicious thrilling finish of another verse.’ And she sang again:

‘The chaff He throws to quenchless flames;’

‘Flames,’ she screeched; ‘do you hear me, affected madam?’ and she curtseyed low.

‘For mercy’s sake, Nurse Bangs, cease. You don’t wish to kill me, I presume?’ inquired my mother of the heartless wretch.
'Kill you?' she answered. 'No, I want to convert you, that's what I want, and to show you plainly what you are, so as to bring you down a peg, yes, bring you down a peg.'

And so the woman went on more or less the whole time, until the arrival of Mrs Wilkins. She brought in some soup certainly once or twice without being asked to do so, also some more tea with a scrap of burnt toast, but that is as far as her efforts in nursing went.

Poor mamma grew worse and worse; curiously enough she did not seem to realise that she was dangerously ill, and did not ask Nurse Bangs to send for the doctor, and the creature herself never thought of doing so, but I don't believe she was crazy about anything else but religion. I heard that otherwise she was supposed to be sane enough, only that she was a cunning, ignorant person of bad character, and that she knew nothing whatever about the management of the sick, never having previously nursed a patient. Of course I discovered this much later even than just after poor mamma left for a brighter world.

You can well understand that the perpetual and dreadful noise the woman made, and the worrying and impudent character of her language, affected my mother's nerves, and conduced to her disorder becoming so serious, putting aside the fact that she had no medical aid until her strength, which at best was never great, had gone, and she had not the power left to fight her insidious enemy, which might have been routed by judicious and careful nursing. And so mamma, resembling some hunted animal, attempted once more to evade Nurse Bangs, who insisted upon standing and preaching. She therefore got up just as she was, and half crawled—for she was so weakened by now—into the sitting-room, but her persecutor followed her, so this move proved worse than useless, and she had not the strength to get back
to bed. It was at this moment that Mrs Wilkins appeared on the scene.

And now, my dears, I think I have given you all the painful particulars of this tragedy—for really I can call it by no other name—and I must tell you that Mrs Wilkins took it upon herself to discharge Nurse Bangs the very next morning. What mamma had confided to her was quite sufficient to make her take this step.

As for Cain Waite, you may be pretty certain that he entirely lost the place he had occupied in papa’s estimation; for events had taken such a turn, and he was found so guilty, as having been the chief factor in directing their disastrous course, that my father could never again look upon his face except with loathing.

Of course, Cecilia and I repeated to papa everything that Mrs Wilkins had told us about mamma’s last illness and Nurse Bangs’ conduct, and he had her up himself, and questioned her minutely. Besides, a diary of my dear mother’s was found in the secret drawer of her writing-table in the octagon room, and in it was a detailed account of Cain Waite’s dastardly conduct; therefore, my father wrote him a letter, the like of which, I may presume, he had never received during the whole course of his wicked life, and ended by desiring him never to darken our house more by his evil presence. So that I never more beheld him; but I know that he was convicted of a forgery, and died in prison.

I said, died. Shall I harrow your feelings and give you the full account of his death? Yes, you would prefer to hear all.

Well, then, the gaol in which Cain Waite was imprisoned was set on fire by an incendiary, and Cain was amongst those of the inmates who perished by fire, for fortunately not all were burnt; many were rescued. An eye-witness informed me that the wretched Cain was last beheld standing on a parapet, to which he had
climbed. And raised against the sky, a tall imposing figure did he so remain, whilst the flames crept upwards from below and at length wreathed around him. To reach him was a hopeless task. On either side and under him, the building was but a mass of fire. Suddenly, he threw his arms wildly towards heaven, and in a voice of the most heart-rending despair and fear, that made the blood run cold of those who heard him, he shouted, 'I am going to the devil—to the devil,' and he fell with the fragment of masonry on which he was standing, and was buried in the fiery grave, whilst the angry lurid tongues shot angrily aloft and played around, dancing yet more merrily over their ghastly destructive work than before.

I must just mention here before I forget it, that I once inquired of Cain: 'Who was the most potent force in the universe, God or the Devil?' because he was so fond of talking of the latter. Doubtless I did not word my query in this style. His reply was characteristic of the man; it was as follows:

'I am always pleased to enlighten the juvenile mind; therefore, Miss Victoria, I may tell you that I think the Devil has taken up the reins, for the present at any rate, and one meets him in a friendly way at every turn. In fact, I feel as if I had known him all my life, and that we were "pals." Absolute evil is so much easier for me to comprehend than absolute good (very probably, I should imagine, in his case), and I am thankful to be one of "the Elect," for if it depended upon my own exertions, I should decidedly never reach heaven at all. I look heavenwards occasionally, just to remind myself, that at some remote period (very remote, I trust, for I have a wholesome horror of dying), I shall, of course, reside there, but otherwise I believe hell would be my future home, for my feet are invariably straying down the broad, attractive, flowery meads which I love. But it is of little conse-
quence, little missy, because, you see, I am "saved" and one of the "Elect." Ha, ha, ha!

I can remember the coarse laugh now, and behold the sleek, complacent hypocrite as he stood before me then. What a career was his, and that of his tool 'Nurse Bangs.' Their manner of death, too, for her end was as awful as Cain's. She committed suicide—strangled herself, I was told—goaded to the act by her terrible imaginings, and by the gloomy remorse which assailed her for the bad life she had led. I believe she killed herself immediately after the news of 'the judgment,' as she termed it, which had overtaken Cain Waite was communicated to her, and as she had been attached to this scoundrel, with as true a fondness as her stony heart was capable of experiencing (for in such a nature as hers, all feelings must have withered and grown inverted), his death probably gave her a mental shock.
And now we will pass over a quiet, uneventful year, in which nought whatever of interest transpired. It was simply a year of mourning and of peaceful living, nothing more. Since mamma's death, papa had become much less domineering in manner, and I fancy, although he never spoke much of such things to us, that his religious views had greatly altered, because he gave up family prayers and did not bother us about going to church, as had been his custom of yore. We all attended occasionally now, but never if the weather were inclement; and even if fine, he and the rest of us constantly remained at home or sauntered in the garden and woods. I also overheard papa saying to Miss Bacon one day, that there was hope for us all, and that he no longer believed in everlasting punishment. The fact is that all the doctrines held and expounded by Cain filled him with horror.

For some time after dear mamma left us, I thought that papa would go out of his mind, as he would keep blaming himself so dreadfully, believing that her death lay at his door. Well, I can't help thinking that in many ways his conduct was open to grave censure. However, he was fortunately one of those persons who soon throw off trouble, and presently he did not appear to fret himself over much, his conscience no doubt having at last ceased to upbraid him,—as in reality, although I cannot upbraid papa as a pattern, and consider that in some ways
he behaved disgracefully—at any rate, one can’t call him a downright villain, for that he was most certainly not. One always has a lingering regard for one’s parents, my dear, be their faults what they may. Don’t you agree?

But what nonsense I am talking, to be sure. Your dear father and mother are quite perfect according to my ideas.

You cannot imagine how clever Cecilia was in household matters. She managed everything with the assistance of Mrs Wilkins, and all went as smoothly as possible; in fact, on more than one occasion did papa express his extreme approval at the excellence of the dinners provided for him, and at the taste displayed by the ‘capable Cecilia’ in the selection of dishes to tempt his palate.

‘What a happy choice you have made this evening, you capital little housekeeper,’ he would exclaim. ‘This sauce is perfect, and blends in a delicious way with the ingredients of that surpassingly good pudding, in the manufacture of which Armstrong has excelled herself; it is well flavoured, and a little sherry is such an improvement.’

Papa was rather a gourmet, you know, and ‘knew what good food was,’ as I lately heard a rich parvenu lady confess, concerning herself.

Towards the end of the year which followed our sad bereavement, papa used frequently to run up to town for a few days, on business we imagined, and as he did not vouchsafe to give us any information concerning his movements, we were forced to draw our own conclusions respecting them.

On his return one evening from one of these mysterious excursions, he begged Cecilia and me to come into the study, as he had some important news to give us. Conceive our dismayed vexation, when he quietly told us that ‘he intended to marry again, that the wedding would be very soon, and that, therefore, he should only
be able to introduce the lady to us after she was his wife.' He added that she was young and very charming, and that he felt sure we should like her, and that he need not ask us to give her a kind welcome, as that he knew we should do so, especially when he acquainted us with the fact that she was a foreigner who had just come over to this country. She could speak English wonderfully well, considering that she had never resided in England, he said.

We were completely taken aback at this unexpected announcement, but we determined to put the best face on the matter, and, of course, we had every intention of receiving the lady properly, and of treating her with civility; and we recognised perfectly that papa had a complete right to marry again if he chose to do so; and that it would be most unbecoming in us were we to upbraid him for taking this step, or indeed give expression to any disapproval, more especially as the wedding was to take place almost immediately.

I can't help saying that we both felt somewhat hurt that he did not acquaint us earlier with the fact that he meditated changing his condition, and Cecilia considered that she had good reason for thinking herself injured, as she had hitherto kept house entirely to papa's satisfaction, and it was rather a bitter pill for her to swallow, to be constrained to hand over the direction of affairs, after she had been at the head of the government for so long—in fact, she confided in me that she already felt like 'a deposed queen.'

Cecilia was fond of ruling, and I, on the contrary, desired nothing better than that everything should be arranged and ordered for me by others. I mean 'on the whole,' for circumstances may arise in the lives of the most easy-going, of the least aggressive or commanding, when for once they resent interference, and determine to 'take their own line' without hindrance, regardless of the warnings
and unseasonable advice of well-meaning, but aggravating friends and relations.

And now I am certain you must be anxious to know what this stepmother was like. I am sure we were, and honestly, I must own that our hearts did not go out to her. It was a horrid sensation, that idea of another person stepping into dear mamma’s shoes, and so promptly too!

As I take a retrospective view, I find that amongst the days that are clearly fixed in my mind in the ever receding past, is that day on which my father brought home his bride. We had been intently listening for the first faint sound of the carriage wheels, and as soon as it fell on my ears we tore down the stairs into the hall, Miss Bacon following us at a slow and dignified pace. The governess never hurried herself; she said ‘it was vulgar to manifest haste in moving from one room to another. You may walk quickly out of doors to warm yourselves during cold weather—that is different’ she would observe. Another of her peculiarities was, that she always left a small piece of food upon her plate: ‘It is a sign of low breeding to finish every scrap,’ she informed us; whereas we considered her to be extremely wasteful. So Miss Bacon descended from her room on the second floor ‘with her usual grace, and in her charming leisurely manner,’ according to her idea, and when she reached us we gazed at her with ill-disguised amusement, for there was a twinkle in Cecilia’s eyes, and I fancy there must have been the same in mine.

The ancient lady was attired in the most glaring red satin; the bodice cut low at the neck, and around the poor skinny, wrinkled throat she had tied one string of tiny amber beads, which she had fastened together at the back with bright canary coloured ribbons; and on her head she wore a head-dress of the same colour mixed with red. Her ornaments were long gold earrings set with carbuncles, and a brooch and bracelets to match; her
hands were encased in white lace mittens, and her feet in square-toed red morocco shoes, on which were sewn the most enormous rosettes I have ever seen.

Cecilia and I had fixed upon this occasion as being a suitable one on which to begin a new era and discard our garb of woe. We were accordingly dressed alike in white muslin, upon which was printed a tiny pink sprig. Cecilia had donned a pale blue sash, and I a pink one.

What was our excitement when the barouche, drawn by four grey horses with postilions, dashed up to the door, and from it alighted papa and the new Mrs Pyecroft. She was very handsome, that was what first struck us. She had wondrous large dark eyes set in an oval, dark-tinted face, and her hair was black as night; her bonnet was white, and her gown and mantle grey, of the soft shade that one beholds on a dove's wing. But the lady did not resemble that soft cooing bird; there was no dove-like gentleness in her expression; rather did she favour the eagle, by reason of the piercing swiftness of her bold glance.

She greeted us warmly with a southern warmth of manner, holding each of us at arms' length at first, whilst she opened those glorious orbs to their fullest extent, and gloated, as it were, upon our countenances rapturously; then she drew us by degrees nearer, and pressed us to her bosom in a firm embrace as she kissed us energetically on both cheeks. Then she said in broken English, turning to my father, 'The most adorable young girls, how I shall love them!'

At that moment Mrs Wilkins came forward, and made the bride a formal and studied curtsey when papa introduced her to her new mistress, who made her a most flowery speech. Poor Mrs Wilkins didn't look herself; she seemed as if she were acting a part. I am sure she felt this change keenly, and that it was very painful to her to see another lady in mamma's place.
Miss Bacon placed herself in position. With a vain attempt at rounding her angular arms, she held her dress on either side, the little fingers of each hand being well curled up, and with her far too tip-tilted reddish nose raised more aloft than ever, she performed a series of profound reverences; in fact, she continued to bend lower and lower until she attracted Mrs Pyecroft's attention.

'Our governess, Miss Bacon,' we said, as we introduced our venerable instructress, who appeared to be dancing a minuet or a gavotte on her own account.

The new Mrs Pyecroft could not suppress a smile which was almost a laugh, as she regarded the ridiculous figure clad in red, but she quickly pulled herself together, and assumed a sufficiently respectful manner, as she expressed the honour and pleasure it afforded her to make the acquaintance of a person so justly renowned for her learning.

Both tone and words were sarcastic, but Miss Bacon would swallow any amount of the grossest flattery complacently and take it all as her due. I cannot say that this mocking raillery exhibited at the expense of the poor governess impressed me at all favourably. It struck me that it was mean and false on the part of my stepmother, besides being anything but the proper way in which a true gentlewoman would behave to one in a lower position. Both Cecilia and Mrs Wilkins, who had been observing the new comer narrowly and with scrutiny, thought exactly the same as I did, for I knew them both so well, and surprise was written on their features. In fact, Cecilia and I commented on the affair afterwards.

For a week or two our stepmother was everything that was sweet and charming. She consulted Cecilia about the various details of the household. She even condescended to beg Mrs Wilkins' advice, and she would invite Miss Bacon into the boudoir under the pretext of
taking lessons in English from that worthy personage, but in reality to ask her questions about our mother. She kissed me so constantly, and caressed me whenever she saw me, in such a kittenish way, besides calling me ‘little cabbage,’ which is a term of endearment in French—as of course you know—that it really was almost too much of a good thing! She was frightfully inquisitive, and used to pump me to any extent as to things which, in my opinion, did not concern her. She inquired, for instance, ‘How much’ every article of clothing which I wore, cost; and after I had informed her, she generally remarked, ‘But that is very dear, much too dear.’

‘Oh, but,’ I replied in one case, ‘you see Cecilia bought me the ribbon, and she always shops so well.’

‘I cannot agree—she is rather extravagant, and don’t you think, adorable angel, that your sister is a trifle vain?’

I bristled immediately, for I could not passively submit to hear Cecilia disparaged. ‘No, indeed, she is most careful and not at all vain, considering how lovely she is,’ I exclaimed.

‘How charming of you to take up the cudgels for your sister in this manner,’ she replied with a little brilliant laugh of sarcasm. ‘You are not jealous, small cabbage. Wouldn’t you mind if she were more admired than you, eh?’ she whispered mischievously, as she peered into my eyes.

‘No,’ I answered indignantly, ‘I do not understand such ugly, petty jealousies. I am devoted to Cecilia.’

‘Ah,’ said the Frenchwoman, showing her pearly, even, white teeth—sharp pointed they were, and appeared to me to resemble the teeth of some wild animal, just then. ‘Wait, wait,’ and the words came out with a hissing sound in a low tone, for she put her red mouth close to my ear. ‘When you both love the same man—when he
chooses her for his wife—then you will see,' and she burst into a peel of silvery mocking laughter.

What strange creature was this who had taken up her abode with us? I gazed at her wonderingly, trembling with vexation, and with a sort of fear, for there was something uncanny in her manner and speech, something to which I was unaccustomed and could not comprehend or fathom. I speedily found out that the new Mrs Pyecroft was in the habit of picking me to pieces behind my back, and sticking pins into me, whenever she was alone with Cecilia, in exactly the same way as she employed herself whilst in my company in running down Cecilia. We compared notes, and voted our stepmother to be a dangerous and treacherous young woman. Had her indifferent conduct ended here, we might have been thankful, but there was worse to follow.

The new Mrs Pyecroft seemed to have economy on the brain—at least in everything which related to the household, or to us. It was very different where her own affairs were concerned, for she was luxurious in the extreme, and inordinately extravagant in her dress in all its various details. We had always considered that dear mamma's apartments were beautifully decorated and furnished, but this young woman declared emphatically that 'she must have all these rooms freshly done up, that they looked so old-fashioned and so plain.' Therefore papa, who was evidently determined to gratify his bride's every whim, ordered in a troop of painters and decorators, who carried out the ideas given them by Mrs Pyecroft; the result being that ceilings, walls and floors soon represented a most terribly and ostentatiously vulgar appearance.

As for the furniture, it was gorgeous beyond words; the whole thing being frightfully overdone. Gilding was heaped on with a trowel wherever it could possibly be
introduced; silk and satin hangings were arranged to obscure the light from the windows; stuffs were disposed and draped exactly where most out of place; my stepmother’s dressing-table resembled a high altar, for it was completely veiled with some thick silken Oriental fabric in which was worked every colour of the rainbow; real lace was sewn in festoons about it, and variegated ribbons, whilst on the top was laid a multitude of massive gold boxes, cut-glass bottles with gold tops, huge brass candelabra, and a most wonderful mirror framed in wrought ivory set with sham jewels. Altogether—it did not strike me then, but I can see it clearly now—the taste displayed was that of the demi-mondaine, not of the gentlewoman.

I will mention here that we had always been accustomed to keep ‘a very good table,’—a fact of which I believe you are aware. Both papa and mamma knew how necessary it was that growing children should be well nourished, so that we had excellent breakfasts and early dinners (at the luncheon hour) in the dining-room, and good, honest schoolroom evening meals; at which latter repasts, fish and eggs were never omitted from the bill of fare.

Latterly Cecilia had begun to dine downstairs with papa. You see she was seventeen years old, and besides, he wanted someone to keep him company. The new wife objected to this custom, saying ‘that two was company and three none, and that it made Cecilia too precocious, and that she mustn’t dine down until she had been to her first ball, at which she was to make her début in four months’ time.’ Of course papa gave in to this nonsensical idea of Jeanne’s (Jeanne was our stepmother’s name, and she wished us to call her so), as he gave in to every other silly notion of hers. She had no principles, and whether a thing was right or wrong she didn’t care, so
long as she gained her own end. She next informed papa that she had been carefully studying all the books of our household expenditure, and meant to make great reductions therein, as she considered that Cecilia and Mrs Wilkins had been carrying on the establishment in a way which would soon land the richest man in the bankruptcy court.

She assured papa that he was very much mistaken if he imagined Mrs Wilkins to be an excellent housekeeper, as she was nothing of the kind, but was most idiotically stupid, not knowing her business in the least; 'and I certainly will not have that stuck-up, conceited creature with her fumbling fingers to dress me,' she exclaimed. 'She understands no more about the latest fashion of curling the hair or of what is modish than a dowdy from the provinces.' And one fine day Mrs Pyecroft came down in a tantrum, saying that she had given that donkey of a Wilkins warning.

We were aghast, and even papa looked rather perturbed, but it was as his peace of mind for days was worth to say much. He only dared to protest feebly, and even that was sufficient to rouse his wife's ire, so he did not utter another word until she observed in a determined tone of voice, whilst she stamped her little foot, 'So, Robert, it will be useless for you to say anything more about it. I presume I have the right to retain or discharge my own personal attendant. Answer, monsieur?'

My father bowed his head in acquiescence. She bent over behind him, and rumpled his thick grey hair with both hands; then she faced him, and placing her head on one side, surveyed him with a coquettish air, as she said mockingly, 'You absurd old fossil—I'll wake you up, and clear out the rubbish in your museum.' Then she added shrilly, looking like a beautiful but most spiteful siren,
'and this day month that petrified, mummified thing leaves my service.'

'My dear,' expostulated my father mildly, 'I cannot imagine why you compare poor Mrs Wilkins to a mummy. What can she have done to displease you? But of course as you have taken such a dislike to her, and insist upon her leaving—well, I suppose she must go.'

'Suppose,' shrieked the new Mrs Pyecroft, 'there is no supposing about it; if she doesn't leave the house I will,' and she stamped her foot with more violence than before.

And so it happened that our good friend Mrs Wilkins was driven out of the house. I know that she was terribly distressed at the idea of being separated from Cecilia and me, and the sorrow on our side was equally great. The hour of parting was a very trying one. We each presented her with a small keepsake, which she declared that she should greatly value. Papa made her a handsome gift of money in addition to the portion of salary which was her due, and Jeanne commented freely upon the unnecessary extravagance of this proceeding.

Mrs Wilkins informed us that she had no intention of entering another situation, but that she should return to her parents, who were still living, and assist her mother to look after the small establishment. She gave us her address in case we cared to correspond with her occasionally.

After this excellent creature's departure, there were many changes made in our manner of living which decidedly did not add to our comfort. In the first place, our stepmother arranged that Miss Bacon, Cecilia and I should partake of an early breakfast together, whilst she and papa had theirs at half-past ten. Our meal was now of a different description from what we had been accustomed, and we really sometimes had barely enough
to eat, whereas I discovered that every possible luxury was served up at my stepmother's table. At luncheon, at which hour we had our dinner, the same parsimony reigned, although there was always some dainty little dish specially prepared for the lady herself.

Papa rarely came into luncheon, so that he was not able to notice the prevailing scarcity of victuals. The evening fish and eggs we were not permitted. A stale cake, or an occasional pot of jam, was the very utmost we were allowed in the shape of an extra of any kind. But Miss Bacon was favoured at her own supper time. I fancy that our stepmother thought it wise not to proceed too far in depriving our governess of the amount of food which she had been in the habit of taking. No doubt she was afraid that the instructress might complain to papa if she were too inadequately and stingily served; therefore did Miss Bacon's suppers make up for the loss, and supply the place of all the other meals.

At nine o'clock a dainty little tray was carried up to the schoolroom, and it was amply replenished with delicacies of the season—in fact, with all that remained over from the dining-room dinner, and probably a nice little dish added as well—so that at the end of the day, the previous stint was obliterated from Miss Bacon's memory. Formerly she had plenty, but the repast had been simple in its nature. Fortunately the good governess constantly invited Cecilia and me to share her meal, so that, after all, we did not come so badly off. Had it not been for this, we should have gone to bed literally in a half-starved condition. You may be surprised that we did not appeal to papa at this crisis in domestic matters, but we thought that it would be safer not to do this, unless it became absolutely compulsory that we should do so, because Jeanne had such an awful temper that we felt positive that if we complained she would make us suffer for it, including her unfortunate husband. And
as in a short time Cecilia would once more be re-established at the dinner table in the dining-room, and as I could make such an excellent meal before retiring, we determined to let things slide, and avoid a row royal.
CHAPTER VIII

About ten days had elapsed since the worthy maid-housekeeper left our roof, when there arrived the smartest French maid imaginable. This young person rejoiced in the baptismal name of Louise, by which name we called her, but to the servants she was known as 'mademoiselle.' She was very noisy, and I overheard the dignified Mears describing her to the first footman as a flirty French mocking-bird.'

Louise was always dressed in a most modish way, and her hair was arranged in the latest style. She wore very short gowns, in order fully to display her neat feet and ankles, and once on passing my stepmother's bedroom, the door of which was wide open, I caught her wheeling round on the tops of her toes, and performing other antics related and belonging to the Terpsichorean art, whilst I stood gazing at her until she ceased, utterly fascinated and astounded. She had been dancing to her own reflection in a mirror, and just as she paused, flushed and breathless, flinging herself upon an easy-chair, did she espy me.

'Oh, Mees Victoria, you roguish girl!' she exclaimed, coolly retaining her seat, which it had already struck me it was cool enough of her to take, making herself at home in such a free-and-easy way in her mistress' dressing-room. I was quite taken aback by the impertinent manner in which she addressed me.
'I really don't know what you mean by calling me a roguish girl,' I replied, in chilling tones, 'it seems an odd thing to say to me.'

'Oh, you English are so stiff,'—steef, she pronounced it, 'such a difference, too, between great ladies and common folk,' she continued contemptuously. 'With us gay Parisians it is so different—and, little mees, you may think yourself very fine, but I doubt if you will ever amuse yourself as I do. I have very much amused myself, and when I return from this desert here, I shall once more laugh and sing—and not be with a long face all day like you grand young ladies—oh, but no! Shall I dance again? So,' and she recommenced, springing up high in the air as light as a feather, and gyrating like a top, whilst the skirts of her gown were swiftly whisked around her, with a pretty frou-frou.

Louise was certainly a very graceful mover. When she had turned and twisted enough to please herself, she stopped as suddenly as she had commenced. Pantingly she inquired, 'Have you ever seen Mrs Pyecroft dance?'

I answered in the negative, and then added wonderingly, 'But surely she cannot do all those steps; and you—where did you learn them?'

'Ah, but you should only see her, it is a dream!' she said rapturously. 'But certainly, she can do them—and far better than I can.' Then as if she thought she had been rather too communicative, having forgotten herself, and wishing to pull herself up and cover her retreat, she continued quickly: 'One learns all these accomplishments in France. I, of course, was destined at first to be a ballerina, and your mamma, well, of course she learnt because she found it entertaining. Shall I teach you?' she inquired.

'No, thank you, Louise,' I replied, for I certainly had not the faintest inclination to jump about in that marvellous fashion. I must own that I thought the
whole affair was passing strange, and when I related what I had witnessed to Cecilia and Miss Bacon, telling them all that Louise had said, the latter threw up her eyes and gave vent to an ejaculation of horror.

'That girl should not be in this house—and altogether I don't like it, but it is not my place to say anything. Of course we know that foreigners have odd ways, and I imagine that Mrs Pyecroft was a spoilt child—she gives me that impression—otherwise I fail to understand why she should have been taught a class of dancing which is only permissible for actresses.' Miss Bacon had begun this speech in a voice almost of thunder, but as she approached its termination an unmusical *diminuendo* was introduced, and as she pronounced the word 'actress' the tones died away in a mysterious whisper. Then she placed her spectacles upon her rubicund nose, and glanced at me over them (her poor nose reminded me of a beacon light).

'Now hearken to me, Victoria,' she observed ominously, and with a gesture of command. 'So long as I am your governess I insist upon implicit obedience from you as my right, and I wholly and expressly forbid your holding any intercourse whatever with Louise. If I discover that you have disregarded my injunctions I shall be extremely pained and angry. As for your taking dancing lessons—of that description—good gracious me!' and her false teeth clicked in sympathetic concurrence with their owner's perturbation. 'Thank Heaven,' she continued with ecstatic exultation, 'that I am English born and bred, a true Briton, a daughter of Albion to the core! No incomprehensible, outlandish, indecorous foreign ways for me, therefore I wish to put it clearly before you, Victoria (and she emphasised her forcible discourse by tapping vigorously on the floor with her beetle-crushing, elastic braced foot) that I will not allow you (if I can avoid it) to acquire any French tricks; and you, Cecilia,'
turning towards my sister, 'who are, alas! so soon to leave my sheltering wing for the gay and deceptive world'—and she heaved a deep sigh—'Dear child, you will soon be entirely emancipated, and in a short space of time I can exercise controlling authority over you no more. Remember, I beseech you then, my present words, which proceed straight as arrows from a heart that is brimming over with affection. Beware of Jesuitical Papists, in fact, of all persons from benighted heretical countries that lie across the English Channel!'

I could not imagine why poor Miss Bacon should speak of Cecilia's entry into the wild gaieties of sleepy country society as if it were instead a meditated and impending journey to the North Pole, at least; but the dear lady was a martyr to exaggerated mental fears, and she was ever wont to magnify mole hills into mountains. Nevertheless she meant well, and although her mode of life had doubtless forced her ideas into a narrow groove and distorted her vision, her nature was kindly. In fact, she was a decidedly good-natured person, and good nature is a very estimable quality, although it is often depreciated and despised by those brilliant and original men and women who, rejoicing in the talent or spark of genius which they are so fortunate as to possess, yet are occasionally lacking in the charming virtue at which they so ostentatiously sneer. So, dear girls, do not underestimate amiability, but strive to cultivate it. An unamiable, hard woman is a creature who instinctively creates a feeling of repulsion! 'Return to your story, ancient moraliser,' you say inwardly, and I will hasten to do your bidding.

A few uneventful weeks, which resolved themselves into months, passed, and then for Cecilia there arrived an exciting day, and indeed for me too, for I was deeply interested in all that concerned my sister, her life being nearly as important to me as was my own. At length
was she to make her début. The filmy white ball gown was spread out upon the bed; it was beautiful in its simplicity, and it mattered not that the cost of the materials of which it was composed was so ridiculously small, for of course my stepmother would not expend a penny more than was necessary on a dress for Cecilia.

Jeanne's toilette was perfectly magnificent, and I considered that she looked radiantly handsome in all her well-chosen finery. She was ready first, because she had the intention of sending Louise to assist Cecilia in arranging her hair and wreath, and to fasten up her bodice.

My stepmother's gown would have stood by itself, the satin was of such a splendid quality. The colour was soft rose-pink—the ground of the design, I mean—and large silver lilies were worked all over it, whilst these were interspersed with the palest green foliage imaginable. She wore beautiful old lace and the Pyecroft family diamonds—which were remarkably fine—besides some of her own, and a row of good-sized pearls, each being without a blemish. But Jeanne's charms were entirely eclipsed by those of Cecilia. I never could have believed it possible that she—Cecilia I mean—could have been transformed into such an angel of loveliness as she appeared before my astonished, admiring gaze. That she was more than ordinarily pretty, I had already known. I knew that her beauty was of no common order, for it had before now been thrust, as it were, a glaring truth, upon my consciousness. Still I was unprepared to behold in my sister such an embodiment of ideal perfection—the pure whiteness of her snowy robes matched the glistening alabaster of her statuesquely modelled neck and arms. The most critical connoisseur could have discovered nothing that was in the very slightest degree inharmonious in the curved lines of her graceful figure, or in the poise of her small well-formed
head; there was not a flaw in complexion or features, and the wealth of burnished golden red hair crowned all, and completed this vision of resplendent immaculate womanhood.

'Oh, Cecilia,' I exclaimed, when I at last managed to find my voice, 'you will surely be the belle of the ball to-night.'

'What nonsense!' she answered laughingly, as she glanced at herself in the mirror, making a delicious little moue, and I noted by the expression of her face, the smile that quivered around her rosebud mouth, the beaming light in her big starry eyes, that she was proud and delighted at the thought of her transcendent beauty. Fluttering, expectant hopes of triumphs and conquests were doubtless thrilling at her heart, for Cecilia did not possess the nature of the timid, retiring violet, she would never be content to blush for aye unseen, she longed to have all the world at her feet, she desired that her power should be recognised and bowed down to by many. The ardent love of the one might be very sweet, but she would crave besides for the admiration and homage of the multitude.

'Wake me up upon your return, Cecilia, and tell me all about it,' I cried, as she followed my stepmother into the carriage, while papa stepped in afterwards.

'Yes, of course I will,' she replied, brimming over with gaiety and excitement.

Therefore, dear grandchildren, when I tell you how through all the hours of darkness, if I slept at all, it was but fitfully, you will understand the reason; for I could not rest till Cecilia was home again; I was so anxious to hear how she had enjoyed herself.

As the clock struck four she entered my room, and literally danced towards me, holding a candle high above her head, and, heedless of the way it spluttered and flickered, she threw herself upon my bed, still shaking
it about, with her countenance wreathed in happy smiles.

Before she spoke, I exclaimed, fearing greatly that she would set herself on fire: 'My dear Cecilia, please set down the candle; look how it gutters—see the sparks flying—Oh!—and begin to tell me about the ball—I am just dying to know all about it.'

She placed the candle on a table. 'You bundle of nerves, I can take care of myself,' she observed, nodding at me mischievously and archly.

'You were right, Victoria,' she added, 'I was the belle of the evening; all the people came up to papa and Jeanne and congratulated them on your humble servant's most enchanting appearance—and I might have had two partners for every dance—and oh! I have met the most charming man—but you can't imagine how fascinating he is—such a face, such a figure, and manners! then his conversation is so interesting—he is so clever and accomplished too, and—

'Who in the world is this piece of perfection—Where does he come from, and what does he call himself?' I queried, with sensible curiosity.

'His name is Count Von Blitz, and he belongs to one of the oldest families in Austria,' replied Cecilia proudly, 'and,' she pursued, 'I danced with him six times, besides sitting out with him.'

'But surely you must have made yourself rather conspicuous?' I hazarded.

'I think not,' she responded, 'at least no one said anything. 'I don't believe Jeanne noticed whether I danced six times or twelve with him, she was far too much taken up with her own amusements to see what others were doing; and as for papa, whenever I happened to look at him, he was watching Jeanne, and fuming.'

'But,' I asked, 'was she so much admired that papa was jealous?'
'I know nothing about the admiration,' returned Cecilia, rather scornfully, 'but I can tell you about the flirting, for in all my days I never saw such an arrant coquette.'

'Have you lived so long?' I inquired, laughing.

'Perhaps not, but I have eyes, ears, and common sense, and a knowledge of what is right and fitting, and I can't think that it is seemly for a bride of a few months' standing to flirt outrageously with almost every man who addresses her, and to sit out for an hour or more with the same gentleman—and how she ogles them all. I am not squeamish, but I declare that she made me feel quite sick. Between you and me, Victoria,' she added mysteriously, 'I sometimes fancy that Jeanne was not a gentlewoman born. There is something very queer about her. She is so undignified and uncontrolled; in fact, this evening she was positively ill-bred. As for some of the chief ladies present, they turned their backs upon her, gave her the cold shoulder most openly, especially when she coquetted with their husbands under their noses—more aristocratic noses than her own, you may be sure!'

'You are too funny, but at the same time this is a serious matter,' I observed, 'for if our stepmother behaves so badly, the county people won't invite her, or you either, and it will be very tiresome.'

'I imagine they will be compelled to ask her to large parties,' she said, 'because, you see, they dare not be so rude as to ignore her, as I presume that there is nothing really against her, and of course papa's family being one of the oldest and most respected in the neighbourhood, they are bound to be civil to Mrs Pyecroft for Mr Pyecroft's sake.'

'Well, she isn't worth talking about,' I remarked, 'but I want to know more about Count Von Blitz. Who introduced him to you, and shall you see him again?'

'See him again? indeed, yes. He is going to drive
over to-morrow. He is staying at Chichester, and was introduced to me by a little fright of a tubby man with a red moon face, and he, the tub, was presented by someone else, I really can't remember by whom. Why, they were brought up to me in crowds. Every fresh one appeared to bring three new ones, and some scowled fearfully when I told them I had no dances to spare, but, of course, I couldn't choose them all, and so I picked out the best-looking ones—those who were the tallest and thinnest, and who had fine whiskers, and had not got turned up noses—a retroussé nose does make a man look such an idiot. As for the tubby man, it is a blessing I didn't refuse him,' she continued volubly, 'and really, it was just by chance that I did not. I had noticed that that smart Miss Vivian was dancing with him, and that he pointed his toes most beautifully, and besides, he had a particularly taking manner. But, just think, 'Victoria, if I had said "No" when he asked me, I should never have known the Count; what a fearful thing that would have been!'

'Would it?' I answered, 'but he may not be your fate.'

'Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He is, and he must be,' she said with determination. 'He is madly in love with me, he told me so; he assured me that he couldn't live more than two days without seeing me again; he described his German castle to me.'

'Which I only hope may not turn out to be a castle in Spain!' I interrupted.

'How can you, Victoria, you are so suspicious! Of course he has a most splendid property, he is almost a prince in his own country, and he just comes over here occasionally for the season, or else for hunting, and also to 'witness the beautiful homely English domestic life,' as he confided to me. 'He is very domestic himself, and loves sitting at home by the fire reading.'
‘A regular tame cat, I suppose,’ I observed rather maliciously.
‘There you are again, Victoria, you scoff so at everything, but indeed, he said that if ever he had a wife—and when he uttered that sentence he gave me such an affectionate look, he—’
‘My dearest Cecilia,’ I exclaimed, ‘this is really too much; a man whom you have only beheld once, and whom you regard in this way, whilst the audacity to hint at marriage, after the first, second, or which dance, pray? astounds me. Had he perhaps regaled himself too freely with champagne?’
My sister was quite offended at this last sally. ‘Good-night, or rather good-morning, I am going to bed—you unsympathetic school-girl. Of course, you know nothing of love at first sight, and I was foolish indeed to have alluded to the subject at all; go to sleep, baby,’ and she retired to her own apartments, whilst I was soon in the land of nod, if not of dreams.
I forgot to ask Cecilia how the bold Count had dared to make known his intention of calling, without first gaining the permission of her parents, but it transpired next morning that he had begged her to present him to her mamma, and that she duly brought him up to Jeanne; the wily foreigner, for so he certainly was, immediately expressing a wish to continue the acquaintance, and coolly inviting himself over, although he ought to have waited until Mrs Pyecroft had requested him so to honour himself. Bashfulness was by no means one of the Count’s failings, and his greatest enemy could not accuse him of letting the grass grow under his elegantly shod feet. I was sitting in a corner of the drawing-room with a book of fairy tales, when this gallant Lothario was announced, and the light from the wide bow window, at the side exactly opposite to the door by which he entered, fell full upon his face and figure.

‘Count Von Blitz,’ shouted Mears in his usual stentorian tones, and my stepmother, who was employed in working a pair of slippers of marvellous hue for papa, rose from her seat to greet her visitor, whilst Cecilia emerged from behind the piano, upon which she had been playing one of the funny old-fashioned pieces then in vogue. She was not a brilliant performer upon the instrument, I consider that she only strummed! I paused for an instant in order to be able to have a real good look at the Count,
and having entirely satisfied myself that his appearance did not please me, I crept softly out of the room by another door.

The new-comer was of imposing stature; his hair was fair, and curled closely all over his bullet-shaped head. His eyes were light blue and handsome, but their expression was unpleasant, false and shifty. The mouth was well cut, and when he smiled, displayed two rows of very large white, even teeth. The long fair, perfectly trained whiskers, were in themselves living proofs of the fond care bestowed in their culture, either by the gentleman himself or by the gentleman’s gentleman. As I discreetly withdrew, I observed the becoming blush which mounted to Cecilia’s cheek, when the cavalier bowed over her hand, with the polished grace of a courtier, whilst he gazed boldly and ardently into her face in a manner which I considered his short acquaintance neither justified nor warranted, and which exhibited, besides, a lack of that respectfully diffident, yet charming, deference which usually marks the honest-hearted and genuinely impassioned lover, for great demonstrativeness and assiduity in courtship, do not always denote a corresponding sensibility, although I will not say that there may not be exceptions to the rule.

After the Count’s departure, Cecilia came up to me in the greatest excitement, and informed me that Jeanne had made him promise to dine at our house on the next evening but one, and that she had already invited a Major Flight with whom she had flirted desperately at the ball. A certain elderly spinster, Miss Angelina Tomkyns was also to be of the party, and I was to appear in my best muslin frock after dinner. My delight at hearing all this news was unbounded, for before me was the prospect of a most entertaining and interesting hour or so. I had every intention of being on the alert with regard to Cecilia and her admirer, and as
for old Miss Tomkyns, she always created diversion and merriment, as she was the personification of the typical old maid. My hair was all twisted up in numberless curl papers the night before, in order to do full honour to the auspicious occasion, and the nasty screwed up things hurt me so, that my slumbers were anything but sweet or restful. However, when the time for my descent to the drawing-room arrived, I believe that I felt altogether pleased with myself, and Miss Bacon, who had put on her spectacles to aid her in surveying me, condescended to remark, 'That I really looked quite modish, and that although I should never be a beauty like Cecilia, still—I was certainly nice-looking—almost pretty—only that my complexion was so pallid.'

When I entered the brilliantly illuminated apartment, for two cut glass chandeliers filled with wax candles were suspended from the ceiling, I found that Mears and a footman were handing round the coffee to the ladies, the gentlemen not having yet left the dining-room. Of course you are aware that at the time of which I am speaking, men sat much longer at table over their wine than they do now at the present day; in fact, I regret to say that occasionally some of these gentlemen were discovered in the position occupied by footstools. However, I am glad to be able to add that such things never occurred at Croft Manor.

Miss Angelina Tomkyns, who prided herself upon her aristocratic manners and dignified carriage, rose from her seat and tripped forward in a deliciously juvenile fashion to meet me. She was arrayed in the brightest yellow, whilst on the summit of her head—her hair being dressed very high—there nodded an enormous bunch of arsenic green ostrich feathers.

'You look very nicely, dear little Victoria, very nicely indeed!' she said mincingly, as she held my hand in a most elegant way with the tips of her fingers; then
she pinched my arm caressingly, and her bony digits hurt me, so that I could barely suppress an 'Oh!'

'What a most amiable ingenuous countenance the bewitching little creature has,' she continued with much affectation, as she turned towards my stepmother, who was lolling amongst the cushions of the sofa; (her ways were always very free and easy compared with those of the somewhat stiff English ladies of that date).

'Victoria is a most peculiar young monkey,—with a wonderful appetite,' she replied. 'By the way, Victoria, I am sure you were on the look-out for the ices,—how many did you consume? And how many wafers? A dozen, I daresay.'

My ire was roused by this teasing and ill-mannered speech, and I was also extremely hurt by being named a glutton, when the horrid aspersion was utterly untrue, and that absurd Miss Angelina believed it. She was sitting bolt upright on her straight high-backed chair, with the pointed elbows of her skinny arms well tucked into her sides, presenting the appearance of a trussed chicken.

'Dear, Dear, Dear!' she exclaimed, with a genteel cough, and she put up her glasses, glaring at me through them with her small faded grey eyes, as if I were an animal from the Zoo, whilst her whole expression was one of unmixed ladylike horror, 'I could not have credited such a thing. If you continue to indulge your craving,—Your h'm unhealthy craving for sweet dishes, you will destroy the symmetry of your elegant figure, Miss Victoria!' and she favoured me with a crocodile smile.

'But I assure you, Miss Tomkyns, that I do not eat—'

I was half-way through my little speech, when my stepmother interrupted me by saying, 'Hold your tongue now, little girls are to be seen and not heard; go over there and play solitaire, or patience if you prefer it.' And
lifting her eyebrows she pointed with her lace fan in the direction where she wished me to go.

I thought it wiser to say nothing, as had I ventured to proceed further and to clear myself in Miss Angelina's eyes, Jeanne would have been so furious that she might probably have ordered me off to bed as a 'most rude and untruthful girl,' and so my fun would have been over. Cecilia, who was seated on an ottoman near Miss Tomkyns, and who was evidently too much absorbed in her own blissful thoughts either to feel or manifest much interest in what any of us said or did, now woke up a little, and regarding my stepmother with a disdainful air, in which was a marked tinge of disapproval, she said, as she left the two ladies to join me in my retreat:

'Never mind, Victoria, harsh words break no bones; besides, one never knows, it is a queer world; positions quickly alter, and the snubber sometimes becomes the snubbed.'

Jeanne and Miss Tomkyns exchanged glances. 'She is so dreadfully elated on account of the Count's attentions,' laughed my stepmother ill-naturedly, 'but who knows whether he may not be playing the fool and amusing himself at her expense?' she added.

'Yes, indeed, who can tell?' echoed the fair Angelina impressively, as she shook her old head solemnly.

'Well, we will see,' replied Cecilia with composure, and she smiled triumphantly, as she whispered to me, 'He proposed to me just after the first sweet came in, and I accepted him.'

'Oh! Cecilia,' I exclaimed in the greatest stupefaction and perturbation. 'But this is beyond everything—how terribly rash of you!'

'Not at all,' she answered calmly, and looking radiant. At that moment the door opened and the Count entered, followed by Major Flight and papa. Cecilia at once intimated to me that I had better move farther away,
which I should have done of my own accord, as I flatter myself that I have always been possessed of a certain amount of tact. Von Blitz pleased me even less now than when I first beheld him. A rapturous expression was on my sister's face as he approached her, which he did immediately, with assurance, conceit and self-satisfaction stamped all over him; his voice resembled, to my prejudiced mind, the purring of a big cat, and in his eyes lay that deceitful surface sweetness, and softness, through which gleamed, when he was off his guard, lurid shafts of cruelty, baseness and viciousness, which can be observed in men of depraved character who are acting a part. He made me shudder, and yet Cecilia could see in his personality only what was charming. I could not hear their conversation, neither did I wish to do so, but I was sharp enough to be able to make shrewd guesses at the nature of it, and I knew when the Count had something unusually complimentary or had made use of some very endearing expression to his beloved, by her heightened colour, shy glances, or downcast eyes.

Then occasionally I turned my attention to the other end of the room, where papa was listening like a martyr to the inane remarks and childish prattle of the empty-headed Miss Angelina, whilst his thoughts were concentrated, and his gaze fixed upon Jeanne and Major Flight, who were flirting in a shameless manner, their heads being in the closest proximity to each other, the gallant major evidently also finding it most necessary, as he was short-sighted, and wore an eye-glass, to hold Jeanne's wrist very near his nose, in order to examine two handsome bracelets which clasped her right arm; and I understood that the lady had not wished to unfasten the jewelled articles in order to hand them to the gentleman for his admiring inspection. Yes, I understood this little comedy, and was disgusted at Jeanne's vulgarity. As for the major, he was enjoying himself vastly, and, no
doubt, laughing at the second Mrs Pyecroft in his sleeve, whilst poor papa was on thorns, and that silly Miss Tomkyns, who considered that she was most irresistible, kept putting herself into the most ridiculous attitudes and gesticulating so as to show off the clumsy, ill-formed hands, which she considered so lovely, to advantage.

My unfortunate father! I really pitied him. Miss Angelina was irrepressible. She imagined that she was delighting him, whereas about one word in ten probably reached his ears, and the innocent winning ways were lost upon him altogether. Poor Angelina, perhaps? No; foolish old woman, I say; at her time of life she should have been more sensible! It grew late, and presently she rose to take leave of her host and hostess amidst mutual regrets, and assurances on her part of the immense enjoyment the evening had afforded her, whilst she promised to do herself the pleasure of calling on dear Mrs Pyecroft at an early date.

'And mind you inquire if I am within,' remarked my stepmother in her shrill tones, 'for I have given Mears the strictest injunctions to pencil a big black cross on the cards of all those visitors that do not desire to see me, and do not ask for me. Such rude people as are some in this neighbourhood I have never before met with. Now in Paris, where everyone bowed down to me—where I was the rage, you would notice the difference.' The eyes, and even the trap-like mouth of the astounded spinster had gradually opened wider and wider during this extraordinary communication of my stepmother's. Doubtless the good Angelina was aware of Jeanne's unpopularity in the county, but her novel departure in the matter of the black cross filled the guest with excusable amazement. Papa looked perfectly glum, and I felt ashamed to think that anyone so ill-bred should be nearly connected with me. 'I keep a black book,' continued Jeanne, nodding like a wicked dark spirit at the fair
Angelina; 'it is bound in the sable hue of night, and therein are inscribed the patronymics of the impudent persons who ignore me. Not again will my barouche and spanking horses be seen passing through the gloomy portals of their domains or waiting before the funereal doors of their accursed houses!' At the close of this speech Angelina literally sprang backwards, and the ostrich plumes in her hair oscillated so violently, that altogether she resembled a savage performing the first introductory step of a war dance.

'Good-bye again, Mrs Pyecroft,' she faintly lisped, and my father with blanching cheeks offered his arm and led her from the apartment.

Major Flight had remained a silent and amused witness of this odd comedy, and he now, doubtless imagining that I was too young and guileless to observe the gesture, winked knowingly at Jeanne, remarking as he did so, 'I think you frightened the old girl, by Jove, I really think so; you are so awfully witty, Mrs Pyecroft, so refreshingly incisive, that 'pon my word it is a real treat for a man to listen to you. But the ladies—ha, ha, ha!' and he shook all over with laughter that was much lacking in refinement: 'I don't expect they find your sayings always entirely to their taste, cap fits too well, ha, ha, ha!' and he laughed again.

'Well, s'pose I must be going—there's an end to all good things,' he said, endeavouring with poor success to look sentimental, 'Good-bye, dear Mrs Pyecroft,'—and he held her hand a shade longer than was absolutely necessary, whilst she gazed up at him with her bold black eyes in a bewitching way.

Au revoir—ta, ta!' she answered gaily. 'It is only good-bye till to-morrow, Major,' and she smiled like the siren that she was.

'All right, I shall be punctual—military schooling, don't yer know, ha, ha, ha!' and he was gone.
'You naughty, ill-bred, inquisitive little thing,' observed my stepmother, turning to me, ill-natured spite written in every line of the face, which two seconds before had been melting in sweetness, 'how dare you play the Paul Pry in this fashion. Then as if she had made a mistake in thus betraying herself, she added rather sheepishly, 'not that I mean that there was anything for you to see, but it is impertinent at your age to put yourself so forward. Where is Cecilia all this time?' and she looked around: 'How disgraceful of her,' she exclaimed angrily, 'a girl just out to be making such an exhibition of herself over there in the corner with the Count! Come here, Cecilia,' she shouted like a fishwife.

My sister, who was conversing in low tones with Von Blitz, both of them displaying a good deal of animation, answered quietly, 'We were just coming, where is papa? I want to speak to him.' At that moment my father re-entered the room, and Cecilia advanced towards him, followed closely by the Count.

'Papa,' began she, with some nervousness and hesitation, 'I wish to ask your consent to my marriage with Count Von Blitz, who has asked me to be his wife.'

'Yes,' continued the admirer, who had already placed himself by her side and was holding her finger tips in a tender lover-like grasp, 'Sir, your most lovely and amiable daughter has done me the extreme honour of promising to take my name and share my ancestral castle or palace—if I may call it so,' and he made a most profound bow, and then placing the hand that was free upon his heart, he added, 'I wait but for your benediction, sir, and yours, madame,' as he whisked round in Jeanne's direction like a dancing master, and setting his heels together, he executed an obeisance worthy of that professor.

'I am delighted,' replied the second Mrs Pyecroft, taking both the beringed white hands within her own and pressing them warmly; 'Dear Count, I had hardly
dared to hope for so much happiness; you must have met with such thousands of handsome adorable women—you who have been a favourite at every Court in Europe. I had no idea that you would think of marrying Cecilia; she is all very well, but such a bread-and-butter miss. In sober fact, then, I did not think you meant "business."

Count Blitz actually winced, and papa looked perfectly aghast, as these fearful phrases fell from Jeanne's rosy lips.

'My dear,' began papa, who had not yet recovered himself sufficiently from the shock of the Count's sudden proposal, even to give an intelligible reply to that gentleman. 'My dear, you are labouring under some excitement, the effort of arranging this dinner has been too much for your nerves. Count,' and he now spoke with his usual firmness and determination. 'You have taken me somewhat by surprise, and you must forgive me when I candidly tell you that I consider your request premature,—for you must allow that our acquaintance has been short to a degree. In such a momentous question as that of a daughter's marriage, of a much-loved daughter as Cecilia is, one cannot answer without some deliberation and reflection. I must beg you, therefore, to permit me to postpone giving you a decisive answer until to-day week, but pray let me thank you for the honour you have done me in wishing to become my son-in-law."

'Sir,' replied the Count, and I perceived that his expression was not as bland as usual, and that he now held himself erectly and proudly. 'Your attitude towards me is, of course, natural, but I had hoped that it might have been otherwise, and that you would have consented to grant my wishes at once. My name must assuredly be well known to you, for it is of the noblest, and resounds throughout the length and breadth of Austria. I have
documents with me now,' and he drew a thin packet of papers from his pocket, 'which I carry with me everywhere, for I am never without them in case of disagreeables in a foreign land. Allow me,' and he handed them to papa, who bowed in his stiff English fashion and said politely, 'that he felt sure that everything concerning the Count was as it should be, and he couldn't think of troubling him with such matters at present—these little affairs would all be settled later on by the family lawyer.'

Von Blitz bowed with his accustomed grace, and replaced the neat packet in the receptacle from which it had come forth, smiling in a cunning way at the same time—so it seemed to me.

'Oh, papa,' exclaimed Cecilia, impulsively, 'it seems rather hard that you should refuse to give a direct answer now, nothing is so terrible as suspense;' and she glanced tenderly and modestly at the Count. 'I am certain of my feelings, and we only told each other a moment ago, that we could hardly believe that we had not known one another for years, or for all our lives.'

'True, true,' chimed the charmer. 'Once to have beheld the incomparable Miss Cecilia is for evermore to become her humble and devoted slave—to lose her would be for me to die—one blow,' and he struck his chest dramatically, 'with knife or pistol, and Franz von Blitz, in spite of all his quarterings, would be no more;' here he heaved a deep sigh, closed his eyes and bent his head. 'Cecilia,' he murmured, turning towards her, as he gazed upon her countenance with rapture, as if she were a toothsome luscious cake that he longed to devour,—

'Cecilia, angelic being whom I adore,' he went on, heedless of the fact that they were not alone, 'whom I love from the glowing depths of my big, big soul,' and he gesticulated like the tenor in a desperate love scene at the opera, 'I here promise your most venerable parent,' (now addressing papa, who frowned, for he disliked to be
thought old), 'upon my most sacred Austrian honour, to be to you—if he will trust you to my keeping—the most excellent husband the world has yet known; indeed, a model, a paragon of unparalleled perfection. I swear it!' and he raised his right hand upwards, with a quick, jerky movement, which managed to unfasten his diamond sleeve-links; noticing this accident immediately, he rearranged his faultless attire.

My father paid but scant attention to this harangue; he appeared to be lost in thought, and turning to Cecilia, said kindly but sternly, 'My dear, you are well aware that I have your interests at heart; now listen to me: you must have patience, for I cannot allow you to receive either visits or notes from Count von Blitz until this day week. I mean what I say,' he continued with emphasis, 'and I am sure that I need not ask you to respect my wishes, because I have implicit faith in you, and you are a capable girl, with your head screwed on the right way; even should I be compelled (which I trust may not be the case), at last, to crush your present desires, you would be too wise and sensible to grieve.'

'But,' interrupted my sister, 'you do not quite understand my character. I am very constant in disposition, and where I have placed my affections, they must remain; what you require of me is not so easy as you seem to imagine. A week is a long time in which to be compelled to keep silence, and to wait in uncertainty, and then at the end of it there is the possibility of your not acceding to our request. I can't help, too, feeling that the arrangement is not quite fair to Count von Blitz, it looks as if you mistrusted him; the idea pains me!'

'Hush, hush,' said papa.

'Sir,' broke in Von Blitz, 'I take my leave of you with sincere thanks for your courtesy, and with sanguine expectation that I shall return a favoured suitor for the hand of your precious and most fair daughter. Madame,
permit me to salute you with respectful gratitude. Cecilia—' and he approached her, and I observed that the Count was whispering into her ear, with his head lowered to the ground, whilst to the rest, who only commanded a back view of him, he appeared to be pausing in his speech, as if overcome by the strength of his feelings, as he bent over my sister. 'Cecilia,' he continued aloud, 'white rose of the garden of Albion, who shall by your fragrant presence bless my ancestral home—at least, such is the most heart-felt most fervent wish of Franz von Blitz—farewell for a few long days till I may claim you,' and imprinting a kiss upon her gloved hand, he left the apartment.

Cecilia gazed tenderly and wistfully after him; papa looked perplexed and solemn, whilst a wickedly, mischievous smile played around Jeanne's lips. For a moment there was silence, and I found myself musing on all that had passed. Had Cecilia's feelings not been so involved in the matter, the whole episode would have struck me as ludicrous in the extreme. I felt as if a farce had been acted before my eyes, for I was positively certain that Count von Blitz's words and manner were too exaggerated to be genuine; they savoured completely of the stage, and I only marvelled that Cecilia could be touched by what only seemed to me as absurd. But of course, she, for some unknown reason, had suddenly fallen desperately in love with this artful, foreign farceur—for so he was in my humble opinion—and I considered my sister's sentiments towards him were of the kind styled collectively 'an infatuation.' It was my stepmother who volunteered the first remark, after the Count's departure. 'You evidently know nothing of distinguished foreigners,' she observed contemptuously, to my father, 'or you would never have treated Count von Blitz with such scant ceremony. It is enough to look at him to see that he belongs to the flower of the German aristo-
cracy. He is a courtier to the back bone—that one can hear also by his language—of course he is accustomed to hold daily intercourse with royalties, therefore, Cecilia,'—and she sneered more than smiled as she spoke, 'you need not imagine it is simply for your benefit that he has invented and conjured up all those deliciously fine phrases, which doubtless have almost turned your silly, vain, little brain. No, no, pretty simpleton, he has had good practice with princes and princesses, nevertheless, you may well feel proud of your conquest, for to be chosen out of all the beauties in Europe and America by such a man, is—'

'I don't know what has come over you to-night, Jeanne,' interrupted my father, with his eyebrows almost meeting over his nose, and a very perceptible shade of annoyance in his tone. 'You forget that Cecilia is my daughter,' he continued firmly, 'and that I entertain the strong conviction that she greatly honours any man on whom she may bestow her hand, be he even a prince of the blood royal. We are of no mean family either, for we reach back to the sea-kings, the Vikings.' Here Jeanne burst out into a mocking peal of laughter. Papa did not deign to notice this sign of levity on her part, but added, with warmth, yet not with violence: 'As to what you say about the Count's rank, I won't dispute that point. I have travelled very little, and so you are correct when you state that "I do not know anything about distinguished foreigners." But let me tell you, Jeanne, that no daughter of mine shall marry any man until I have made full inquiries respecting his parentage, character and means. I may possibly have been a fool as regards my own private affairs, (this was muttered to himself unpleasantly), but where my children's affairs are concerned, I promise you that I shall be more careful, and that I will brook no interference from one who is my wife, but not their mother.'
I listened to papa with inward delight, and when he had finished, it was with difficulty that I refrained from clapping my hands and shouting ‘bravo’ like an excited damsel of the people in the gallery of a theatre. Even Cecilia was momentarily roused from the ocean of sentiment in which she was submerged; there was quite a naughty twinkle of suppressed mirth in her glorious orbs, as she glanced across at me to discover if I reciprocated her feeling of pleasure at Jeanne’s richly deserved reprimand. The lady in question tossed her head, and darting a venomous look at papa, from the darkly fringed eyes in which lurked an indescribably devilish expression, answered in her high soprano, which under provocation became hideously ear-piercing and nasal—

‘So you wish to insult me, Mr Pyecroft? Decidedly you are no gentleman, neither do you possess the least personal attraction. How could I?’ and turning, she surveyed herself in a long gilt edged mirror, ‘how could I—a much admired young woman—have allied myself to such a dull, commonplace, dried up old mummy as yourself? It must have been in a moment of madness—May and December!’ Then she laughed derisively, and raising her voice still more, she added, ‘Yes, it was madness; I that was the belle of the most civilised city in the world, the favourite of the Paris Tivoli.’

Cecilia and I started; what could be her meaning? She passed through the open door, and in a frenzy of effervescing delirium—her whole person being inspired with a devilry of insane recklessness—she screamed out: ‘Louise! Louise! come down! be quick! I want you to dance to “that old Pyecroft” as you call him!’

I imagine that undisguised horror was now depicted on our faces, but I cannot say. We were all gazing at the staircase, down which the French maid descended at the very instant that Jeanne ceased to shout. Pleased surprise illuminated the Abigail’s impudent countenance.
SIR GASPARD'S AFFINITY

She was very smartly dressed, much too smartly for her position, in a cast-off bright blue silk gown of my stepmother's; the skirt being very voluminous, and arranged with bows of the same shade of colour; she wore a much be-frilled and pink be-ribboned muslin apron, and a locket set with pearls dangled on a chain at her neck. Jeanne beckoned to her wildly: 'Come, my little pet—come, duckie!' she cried, 'we will dance together as we did in the happy days that are fled, at the entrancingly joyful, popular Tivoli,' and she began to hum a wild sort of melody, in which Louise joined. They placed themselves opposite each other and presently still humming the tune, they sprang, they hopped, they whirled round on their toes, they glided and rounded and entwined their arms, in a distracting, bewitching way, until dizzy, flushed and worn out by the vigorous exercise, they threw themselves panting and exhausted on to the nearest sofa. Our amazement cannot easily be described. As for poor papa, I believe he must have been almost struck dumb during the performance, for he stood there as if petrified, and it took him a few seconds to recover himself. When he was once more able to articulate, he said huskily, 'Go to bed, girls—h'm, h'm. Your stepmother has been taught by a first-rate French dancing master, and has, of course, amused herself in instructing her maid.'

'Not at all, not at all,' interrupted Jeanne; 'good-night, my dears, good-night.'

Papa spoke even more huskily than before, and literally waved us off.

There was little sleep for me until the morning, for once upstairs, there was much to talk about and much matter for contemplation. Cecilia's mind was naturally utterly occupied with the Count, so that not a corner was left for any other subject. She sat on my bed pouring out her heart to me for more than an hour. She wouldn't hear a word against her dear Von Blitz, he was just perfection
in her eyes, and it was utterly useless for me, a younger sister, to attempt to show her the folly of so implicitly putting her whole trust in a man whom she hardly knew, although I tried my best, and did not withhold from her my firm conviction that in engaging herself so promptly, she was simply committing an act of lunacy, and laying herself open to the imputation of having taken leave of her senses.
CHAPTER X

Next day we related the events of the previous evening to Miss Bacon, who was scandalised when she heard about Jeanne's conduct, and told us that she felt convinced that both she and Louise had been ballet girls—which conjecture had already become a fact according to our ideas, for Jeanne's allusion to the 'Tivoli,' was more than suspicious, and we wondered how much papa had known about his new wife's antecedents when he married her; most probably she had 'taken him in,' for he had, as he told us, only made her acquaintance in London at some social gathering.

Two days passed, and nothing of importance transpired, but I remembered afterwards that Cecilia had grown rather abstracted, and that several times when I addressed her, she seemed not to hear, but to be completely wrapped up in her own thoughts. On the morning of the third day I found her in tears, and when I inquired the cause, she told me that 'papa was most unsympathetic, and that he had informed her she had better not think too much about the Count, as he (papa) having written to three friends in town to make inquiries respecting him, had received letters from all, to say they had never even heard of such a person as Count von Blitz. He had also been equally unsuccessful when he endeavoured to discover who had brought him to the county ball, for no one in the neighbourhood had apparently done so. He
had been included in none of the house parties, and the little fat man who was responsible for his introduction to Cecilia was unknown and nowhere to be found.

Cecilia herself could furnish no light upon the subject, she had never even thought of asking the Count how he came to be at the ball. Papa felt that it would be awkward to question the gentleman himself just then, although he might be compelled to put him through a catechism later. In the meantime he had written to the English ambassador at Vienna, and he had as an afterthought just penned a letter to the Austrian ambassador in London, feeling sure that the latter high official would be able to help him out of his difficulty. As the day wore on, Cecilia became extremely restless. She would start at the least noise, and appeared altogether unable to settle herself to anything. My remarks irritated her, so that I found it was wise to keep my thoughts to myself. It was my custom as a rule to retire early. Papa and Miss Bacon did not approve of late hours for growing girls, and they were right. I was therefore usually tucked up in bed by nine o'clock, and before sleeping I invariably drank a glass of milk, which was a childish habit that I had not discontinued with my riper years. It was the schoolroom maid's duty to bring me this, and I can well remember my astonishment on the memorable evening of which I am speaking, when instead of the neat black gowned and becapped Sarah, there entered the saucy Mademoiselle Louise, arrayed in a pearl grey silk gown on which was a staring pattern in crude orange. In her hand she carried the glass of milk which she offered me, saying, 'I beg your pardon, Miss but Sarah is doing some ironing for Madame, so I have brought you this!' and she showed almost every tooth in her head as she smiled. She waited whilst I drank, and then asked, raising her eyebrows and pouting out her lips, 'Is it good?'}
‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘of course, why do you ask?’

She broke into a peel of rippling laughter and pirouetted out of the room. ‘Milk is such a babyish drink,’ she observed, looking back before closing the door. ‘Good-night, Miss Victoria; pleasant dreams,’ and she began to laugh again, for I could hear her all down the passage.

Did I dream? I think not. Oh, how heavily I slept, and when I awoke it was with a racking headache, with a lead-like sensation in my limbs. The sun was streaming into the room, and by my side stood Sarah with an air of anxiety and dismay about her. ‘It is twelve o'clock, miss,’ she exclaimed, and her voice trembled. ‘I have been trying to wake you for the last three hours. Are you ill?’ she pursued. ‘And oh, miss, something too awful has happened—Miss Cecilia has gone away.’

‘Gone away,’ I echoed, in consternation. ‘Sarah, you are joking, you can’t be in earnest, do tell me that it is not true.’

‘Indeed, miss, it is far too true—and miss,’ here she lowered her voice into a blood-curdling, awe-inspiring whisper, ‘they do say as how she has run off with that foreign Count. Oh deary me, what a sly, wicked, young lady—and Mrs Pyecroft’s jewels all gone too, all the Pyecroft family diamonds as well as her own. Mercy oh!’

I am sure I cannot tell you what I answered. I was struck dumb, and my brain seemed to be whirling. I managed to control and collect myself sufficiently to get up and go into my sister’s room.

‘It is just as she left it,’ said Sarah, who had followed me.

I gazed around; disorder reigned everywhere, with the exception of the little white dimity- curtains bed which had evidently not been slept in. Hats, shoes, frocks, and trinkets were strewn about in confusion. I walked over to the dressing-table, and on the pincushion was a sealed note addressed to me. I tore it open, and in so-doing turned to the maid-servant and begged her to leave me.
I believe that I shook like an aspen leaf whilst I was reading; these were the contents—

'My dearest Victoria,—I fear that you will think me a perfect wretch, but at any rate you shall not say that I am a hypocrite, for I mean to confess all my sins and short-comings to you. Do not think too hardly of me, Victoria, and believe me that I should never have behaved in this way had dear mamma lived, for really of late I have hardly been able to bear my life, because Jeanne has made it so bitter. I fancy that she is jealous of me on account of my beauty (for my mirror tells me I am beautiful), and the Count confirms it. You have no conception of the intensity of my love for that man; my heart has gone out to him past recall; this short absence is unbearable; I seem to see him and hear him at every moment.

You saw that papa had driven me half frantic this morning—had mamma been alive, I might have been patient, and for her sweet sake I might have endeavoured to combat this recklessness; left as I am to my own thoughts the feat is beyond my strength. I read in papa's face that he was doubtful if he would give his consent, and I met the Count just before dinner last evening in the shrubbery (that was arranged when we dined here) and yesterday he implored me, as I loved him, to fly with him to-night. He assured me that by this courageous step I should prove to him, without the shadow of a doubt, that my affection was sincere and worth the winning, and that it would be a most charmingly romantic proceeding, with a delicious old world flavour about it, just the action that a lovely maiden in the good old times would have nobly performed. He added that he felt sure papa disliked him because he was a foreigner, and that he would never allow us to marry if he could help it, and he had only postponed giving a definite answer in order that he might gradually bring me to realise that he meant to say
“No.” And so, dear Victoria, I have promised Count von Blitz, or Franz, as I now call him, to run away with him at midnight. Do forgive me! That artful Louise (she was indeed artful), heard a great deal that we said—she saw me meet him from her window, and she came out to spy. What was I to do? She taxed me with making secret assignations, and threatened to go at once to papa and inform him of my conduct. Had I allowed her to do this, all my plans would have been frustrated, and indeed I feared that I might never more behold my beloved Franz; I therefore gave her ten shillings, which I had in my purse, rightly conjecturing that a girl of her type would be open to a bribe. She pocketed the douceur promptly, and amidst a torrent of French flattery, offered to assist me in any way she could. The ingenuity of her brain simply staggered me.

‘And now, dear Victoria, comes the worst part of all, and as I relate it, I feel like the blackest criminal that ever breathed. Can you ever pardon your erring sister for her hateful behaviour towards you whom she loves devotedly? I was well aware that you, in the honesty and uprightness of your character, would never, never permit me to leave papa’s house in this way. You are a light sleeper, and as my room opens out of yours, you would have heard my preparations; I could not have passed through on my way to the corridor without waking you; but before I breathed a word of this prospective difficulty to Louise, she had given it her careful consideration and prepared for it. It appears that Jeanne is often wakeful, and takes some powders to overcome the fiend Insomnia; they were so harmless that any child might swallow them with impunity, said Louise, and she proposed mixing one in your glass of milk. I know you have had the sleeping draught, dear Victoria, because Louise came to tell me that she had given it you herself, and just now I had been making quite a loud noise in my
room by pulling some boots out of the cupboard, and I also was so nervous that I let my work-box fall; I went in quickly to look at you and found that you were slumbering quietly and sweetly. I kissed your forehead too—and I mean to kiss you again when I leave, for oh, Victoria, I have often been cross and horrid to you—but I am really and truly very, very fond of you, and I think my red hair must in some way influence my temper! So you will wake refreshed from a long, beautiful sleep to find that I am gone. Next time you see me, dear, I will be the Countess von Blitz. Think of that! you know I am proud,—and were I not certain of being married at once, I would not go away. You will believe this, because you understand my character; and besides I wouldn't lie to you, you are sure of that. I couldn't endure to be disgraced, and I utterly despise a woman who can lower herself to live with a man without bearing his name. Farewell, dear sister; once more I beg your forgiveness most humbly, and remain ever your affectionate sister,—Cecilia.

"P.S.—We are to be married at eight o'clock to-morrow morning—I shan't tell you where; that is a dead secret. Of course we shall be travelling like the wind all night."

And this was the end of the epistle. I had read it through without missing one word, and now without a moment's hesitation I threw on my dressing-gown and rushed down the stairs to find papa, calling to him as I ran.

"Come to me in the study," he replied.

The door was wide open, and he was sitting at his writing table, with his head buried in his hands. He looked up as I entered, and his face was pale, drawn, and haggard; in those few short hours he seemed to have grown into an old man.

"Your sister has almost killed me—I have sustained a terrible blow," he said, as he gazed vacantly into space.
I handed him the letter silently, for no words would come, my heart was bursting, and the tears were already coursing down my cheeks. Papa perused that long note of confession, and then tore it into fragments, throwing the pieces into the paper basket; then he brought down the clenched fist of his right hand heavily upon the desk in front of him. 'Fool, fool!' he exclaimed with violence, in a voice all tremulous with emotion, 'how does she know that he will marry her? And even if he should—what a man with whom to ally herself—thief, burglar, that's what he is. He got into Jeanne's room— as far as we can tell—at about the time when we were at dinner, or soon after, and bore off every article of value that he could lay hands on. She keeps all her jewels in a drawer of her wardrobe and her money in a cash box in the same place; she only discovered her loss early this morning when she wanted to get change for a five pound note, and found that bank notes and cash had disappeared, the box having been broken open—and that all her diamonds had gone too—and the wretch who has thus robbed her and what is far worse, robbed me of my daughter—is no more a Count than I am; he is Louise's brother! Far better would it be if Cecilia were in her grave than to be brought to shame like this!' and his voice broke.

'Louise's brother!' I gasped. 'But how fearful; how do you know?'

'An open letter dropped out of her pocket as she was leaving Jeanne to fetch me to give me the news of the burglary; your stepmother picked it up, and as she is not as particular as some people are, in the matter of reading what was not intended for her eyes, and as she already half suspected that Louise knew something about the robbery, because she turned livid when Jeanne perceived that the drawer no longer contained all that she most prized upon this earth (this was indeed true for Jeanne was a most grasping woman, and her affections
were solely centred upon gold and diamonds), she made herself acquainted with the contents of the letter, and so learnt that the Count and Louise's brother are identical.

'But for heaven's sake let me hear all!' I cried in anguish. Poor papa was suffering frightfully, I could see that.

'Patience, my dear, and I will tell you—but I can scarcely collect my thoughts—I am half out of my mind!' and he began to pace up and down the room, with one hand pressed against his forehead. Then he continued: 'Of course the letter commenced with the words, "My dear Louise" (it was written in French), and the writer went on to say, how successful he had been in gaining Cecilia's youthful affections, and how cleverly he had gullied the whole family by making them believe that he was Count von Blitz, an Austrian nobleman, when he was in reality only Louise's brother. He said that he could easily bag both money and jewels (thanks to Louise's directions) before he eloped with the lovely Miss Pyecroft, to whom he declared he was devoted, (here papa made a wild gesture). He terminated by trusting Louise would soon be able to captivate some John Bull with a large fortune who would give a helping hand to her affectionate brother, Francois.

'And the worst of it is,' added papa, 'that we have not a single clue to the whereabouts of your unfortunate sister; that wretched Louise declares she knows nothing about her brother's plans—of course I have had her taken into custody as an accomplice in the act of plunder—for she was certainly an accessory, and I am having the country, as well as London scoured by detectives; I can't do more. Then—' and papa hesitated for a second, 'after all,' he pursued, 'I think you are old enough to know the whole of this detestable matter.

'When leaving, Louise made some frightful allegations against your stepmother; she said that she was no
gentlewoman by birth, but of as common extraction as herself, that they had both danced at the "Tivoli" in Paris (when Jeanne shrieked out something of the sort the other evening, I imagined it was fun, and she told me later that it was her nonsense). My dear—I find—and papa hesitated, 'I can tell you no more, excepting that your stepmother is in hysterics, that she continues to exclaim that she wishes she had never come over to England, that she never cared a straw for me, and that now her jewels have gone, there is nothing to remain here for, and she shall go back to France, unless I promise to replace them immediately.

'As for Louise's accusations, she doesn't deny them; on the contrary, she laughs in my face and screams out: "I don't care, old idiot, now all those sparkling stones have been taken away from me, and you so mean that you say you can't afford to buy others—no, not even one paltry brooch. Yes, I was a dancer; nicely I deceived you. You thought me a fine lady—well, every word that Louise said was true. Give me a good allowance,—for go I will, back to my country!''

'And now, Victoria, don't you pity your father? Perhaps you are too much of a child, and I may have done wrong in confiding in you thus, but I long for sympathy; I am in a hell of misery!' And he once more seated himself at his table, and buried his face in his hands, whilst his strong frame was shaken by sobs.

I did not attempt to console him, beyond saying that we must both hope for the best, and I begged him to endeavour to calm himself. 'Some grief is too deep for words,' and 'frequently the most real sympathy is best expressed by silence.' I felt both these truisms keenly in my own soul just then, and it seemed to me that it was best for both of us to be alone. So like a little mouse I crept out of the room and back to my own, when I dressed as quickly as possible, and then sat down in my arm-chair
to think. But I soon found that thought was of no avail, for it pointed to no possible line of action, and I at length arrived at the conclusion that 'it is a long lane that has no turning,' and that it would be a mistake to allow myself to sink lower and lower in a despond of fixed wretchedness. I bathed my eyes, which were red and swollen with weeping, and went to the schoolroom.

There I found poor Miss Bacon with her nose redder than usual, and with her cap set on as crooked as a soldier's, sobbing. The good creature was attached to Cecilia after the fashion of a faithful dog; she was fond of me too, but Cecilia had ever been her pet and favourite.

'I am sure that a judgment like unto the plagues of Egypt has descended upon this house,' she moaned, as soon as she perceived me. 'Our sins must have been grievous to have brought down such wrath, yet I do not honestly feel that I can reproach myself in any way in particular. Do you consider me guilty, tell me candidly, Victoria? I have been undergoing severe self-examination, yet I cannot search out the offending spot. As for dear Mr Pyecroft (poor man, it cuts me to the heart to see him so afflicted), although I allow that he has been rash and short-sighted and too easily led by others—I cannot admit that he has done wrong intentionally or wilfully, there is no one to whom to appeal—so I really desire your opinion, Victoria.'

'Dear Miss Bacon,' I replied, 'I have no faith in the idea of judgments being sent upon us after the manner of thunderbolts. My conviction is, that the consequences of a person's mistakes or errors follow as a natural course, without any special Divine interference. That we are all under the rule of an Almighty Providence, I, of course, believe; but to regard this glorious Deity, the Creator of the vast Universe, as if He were a revengeful man, is, to my mind, revolting in the extreme. It is possible too, that we are born under certain conditions, and that we
are bound to meet with the trials and sorrows that are ranged along our pathway, the joys also.'

'What a most extraordinary child you are, Victoria; how came you to have such wonderful thoughts? But the sentiments to which you have just given utterance would form a dangerous doctrine, if allowed to drift into a belief, for then you see, it would be useless to fight against obstacles, or to endeavour to rise above things—one would say it is fate—one would in fact even tire of trying to be good.'

'No, no, Miss Bacon; you do not altogether grasp my meaning. My fancy is, that the hindrances are there, the miseries and all else, but that we have the power in ourselves of changing them into blessings or the reverse, and that if we strain every effort in the attempt to do our best, we may perchance discover that some dewy roses are springing up around our feet, where we least expected to see them, and a lovely brilliant light piercing through the dark clouds o'erhead, for is there not a peaceful feeling, a kind of quiet self-satisfaction, which goes hand in hand with well-doing? Then life does not end with this world, something within me tells me so, often and often. Whenever I lie awake at night, I love to think how dear mamma is a beauteous angel, and how sad she would be if I did not always try to do right. Don't you think she is helping me and looking down on me? Oh yes; I am sure she is. Then isn't it better and wiser always to be brave? It seems so cowardly to give in too—but I wish, I wish that Cecilia was with us here—I cannot bear to think of her as she is. Oh, if only she had not run away!' and in spite of all my fine notions and phrases I broke down again and mingled my tears with those of the kind hearted governess.
CHAPTER XI

For days a gloomy pall seemed to be hanging over the house, papa was half out of his mind. He had received answers to his missives from both the grand personages to whom he had addressed himself; neither of them had ever heard of Count von Blitz. Of course we had already known that this would be the result of his inquiries in both directions, unless there happened to be some nobleman who bore that title. The maid's surname was Nauray, and naturally her charming brother Francois' name was the same. It soon transpired that the French police had been 'wanting' the sham Count for some time past, as he had been implicated in several daring burglaries in Paris and its surroundings. So far, however, it had proved impossible to trace him, and it was a puzzle to the sharpest detectives, both in France and England, whither to wend their steps in his pursuit, for he had managed his flight with Cecilia so cleverly, that no one could say in which direction he had flown with her.

It seems that on the night of the elopement, three or four travelling carriages had been noticed in the neighbourhood, each one, at about the same hour in a different place; witnesses proved that this was so, and it was doubtless a clever arrangement of 'the Count's' to throw us off the scent.

None of us had paid much attention to Jeanne since this trouble had overtaken us. She had kept entirely to
her apartments, conducting herself like a maniac—howling, screeching, and raving in a perfect fury about the loss of her jewels, and poor papa did not dare to show his face inside her doors, for if he ventured near her, she showered such a volley of abuse upon his head, that he beat a hasty retreat. She had evidently contracted an ungovernable and unreasonable hatred for him, and altogether at this juncture his life was not enviable.

Now for something funny. One afternoon about a week after Cecilia's disappearance; we, that is to say, Miss Bacon and I, hearing the sound of wheels, peeped out of the schoolroom window, which looked on to the front. What was our astonishment when we saw Major Flight jump out of a close brougham, ring the bell, and re-enter the carriage. We were now craning out our necks, anxiously awaiting the next interesting move. We had not long to wait, for within a shorter space of time than it is possible for me to relate the incident, appeared the two footmen, bearing between them a ponderous trunk, on which were inscribed the initials J. P. The servants disappeared and immediately returned with a box of still larger size, and of greater weight, for it was all they could do to lift it; but with the aid of the coachman both heavy articles were placed on the roof of the vehicle. The gentleman within once more emerged like a snail (although with far more celerity) from his shell-like nook of concealment, in order to receive no less a person than my fair stepmother, arrayed in the most attractive dark-green travelling costume, crowned by a very modish and jaunty hat to match, on which was coquetishly pinned a gauze veil. Jeanne smiled archly at the gallant Major whilst he ogled her admiringly, and instantly handed her into the brougham, into which she tripped gracefully and lightly, displaying as she did so the hem of a smart lace-trimmed petticoat and a pair of irreproachably neat feet and ankles. The driver loosed the reins and they were off.
And what did we now see and hear? There was Jeanne’s face at the window: ‘Farewell, old Pyecroft! Adieu, elderly Pyecroft!’ she shrieked, as she waved her handkerchief frantically—and then another head appeared, that of the Major, whilst his hands were raised to the tip of his nose in a very vulgar manner, and he proceeded to perform with his fingers a winding operation, which made the horrid gesture all the more insulting, and he was still occupied in this way, and Jeanne was still screaming ‘Adieu, old Pyecroft,’ until a turn in the drive hid them from our view.

Miss Bacon and I looked at one another, and then we burst out laughing, and I believe that our hilarity was all the more unrestrained on account of the dejection into which we had for so long been plunged, and perhaps our merriment was a little spasmodic and unnatural; we were not really joyous, but the scene we had just witnessed was enough to cause a laugh in the veriest Niobe. (I leave the male sex out of the question, but a little bird whispered to me that the footmen were so convulsed that they could hardly shut the door). You will observe that I have not mentioned the important Major-domo, Mr Mears, as having been present (although he might have pointedly kept himself hidden inside the hall) to assist in speeding Jeanne in her flitting. But I was informed that he only knew of the guilty plan just as it was being put into execution—in truth, when the Major arrived to fetch her, and the butler, a right thinking and strictly moral man, refused very properly to give his countenance to Jeanne’s sinful action. So he remained in the pantry, and was heard to remark afterwards that Mrs Pyecroft was a shameful hussey, and no better than she should be; and that she had conducted herself real atrocious to her poor husband, as did use to love her like the ‘apple of his eye,’ although of late he (Mears) had noticed, with satisfaction, that he ’ad seemed to be a-getting more cool and
reasonable, no doubt on account of 'er heartless bad be'aviour.'

I must own that neither Miss Bacon nor I were in the least distressed because the new Mrs Pyecroft had relieved us of her company in this sudden and peculiar fashion. I always disliked and mistrusted her; and Miss Bacon had ever manifested the most thorough aversion or even hatred towards her. She, indeed, in no way attempted to disguise her unfeigned delight at Jeanne's departure.

'Oh, what a good riddance! perhaps I am very wicked to say so, but it really is. Now I feel that I can once more breathe freely!' she exclaimed in a joyous tone.

As for papa, had it not been that he was anxious about Cecilia, I should have said that he looked pleased. He was actually in the study, with the casement thrown wide open when his false spouse drove away, and he was both a beholder and a hearer of the delightful comedy which the lady and her lover played for his benefit. He was not edified, but, indeed although he was enraged at the time, I don't believe he cared. He had no more idea than any one else that Jeanne really contemplated leaving him; when she held that threat like a sword over his head, he fancied it was the nonsensical menace of a violent, spiteful woman. Neither did it cross his mind that she meant to elope with Major Flight; he was therefore completely taken aback by the whole proceeding. Of course any man would be furious if his wife were stolen from him, because he feels that he is made to occupy a foolish position, in the eyes of the world in general; more especially does he detest to be lowered in the estimation of his own sex, and to cut a very sorry figure, as he fears, before their relentless gaze. I am sure that this masculine reason was the only one that disturbed papa's equanimity when he mused upon his loss, for his affection for Jeanne had fled.

I am able to relate to you, dear girls, now, circumstances that were unknown to me then, for I was too youthful to
be made acquainted with the unvarnished record of my stepmother's life, before and after she met papa. My poor father when he married Jeanne believed her to be a respectable girl. He was introduced to her at the house of a lady of fashion, who went in for inviting celebrities, and who was not so particular as she might have been in instituting inquiries regarding the character of her guests, nor did she much care, so long as they amused her. My stepmother managed to obtain a card for this party on the strength of her beauty and of being a foreigner, and it was through the intervention of a man who ought to have known better, that she effected the manoeuvre. Jeanne was artful and cunning to a degree, besides being possessed of decided intelligence. She invited my father to call upon her at the hotel where she was staying—which was one of excellent standing, where the cautious Paterfamilias might be seen with his prim wife and marriageable daughters. She told papa that she was an orphan, and compelled unfortunately to reside alone—with the exception of a grim gorgon like companion-maid, who was probably hired for a few weeks, and sat in a corner like a mute during papa's visits.

Jeanne seemed to be the essence of modesty and propriety, and papa was so taken in by this sweet demeanour, and so touched at the thought of the dear artless young thing's loneliness, that within a very short space of time he proposed and was accepted, with the result already shown. Later, as you know, all sorts of dreadful secrets of this charmer's previous life were unveiled. That she had been a dancer, you have heard, but had that been all it would not have much mattered. You will be horrified when I tell you that she had before coming to England systematically lived under the protection of various gentlemen, leaving each in turn when she tired of his society, when she had sufficiently emptied his purse, or if she thought she could place herself more
advantageously and luxuriously; the career of the impudent maid Louise had been much the same.

Jeanne had evidently imagined that she was doing a very good thing in marrying papa, and she may also have wished to become an honest woman, for I have heard that the feeling of chastity or honesty is natural to the female breast, and that those who have gone far astray can appreciate the full value of this quality, which is latent in their own souls, and that they are in reality envious and jealous of their happier, because more virtuous, sisters. The vicious and depraved, or such as have chosen evil in preference to good, perhaps from a want of will-power to keep them straight, can never know peace of mind, which means internal bliss, until they return to the path of righteousness.

It was Miss Bacon who gave me the full account of Jeanne's chequered existence; her 'biography,' in fact, and it had been recounted to her by papa, who not long after the faithless one had deserted him, came up one day to the school-room, and poured this history into his loyal old friend's ears. He confided to her 'that his most ardent wish was to forget that he had ever met Jeanne; that he should take no steps to regain her, as he desired never more to behold her, and that he intended to sue for a divorce immediately.' And so it happened a few months later that the divorce being granted papa was once more a free man.
CHAPTER XII

You ask me what became of the second Mrs Pyecroft, and I will gratify your curiosity. As soon as it was legally possible, Jeanne and Major Flight, were married, and took up their abode at Monte Carlo, a very fitting locality for such loose fish as they! The Major was madly addicted to gambling, and frequented the tables at all hours; at first he was lucky, winning enormous sums, but afterwards, as is usually the case, fickle fortune left him, and he began to lose. Daily the losses increased in magnitude, and the Major, who at all times partook freely of brandies and whiskys without the soda, between meals, commenced to drink still more heavily in order to drown his care, and constantly came reeling home at daybreak.

Flight had represented to the fair Jeanne as an extra inducement towards constraining her to fly with him, that he was much blessed with this world's goods, which statement, needless to say, was false, and when the lady discovered that she had been deceived, her rage knew no bounds. It was only after she had appeared with him before the Registrar that she found out the dreadful truth, and her feelings then may be conceived.

However, it seems that she was still rather fascinated by the gallant Major, so she did not part from him on the spot; besides, she fervently hoped that he might gain a few thousands at cards—for why should the fates not prove propitious? But she was doomed to disappointment,
as already stated. And now this unprincipled woman grew reckless, and as the funds grew less, so did her patience with the miserable husband of her choice. She grumbled incessantly, and lamented her sad lot, whilst at the same time she determined that she would put up with it no longer, and she looked about her with the view of finding some idiotic, moneyed individual, who would relieve the wretched Major of the burden of supporting her.

She soon pitched upon one who fulfilled her requirements, in the shape of a very common, but also very opulent, stockbroker, who would be able to furnish her plenteously with the modish garments and luxuries for the sake of which she would readily have bartered her soul. This gentleman had promised to carry Jeanne back to England, and establish her at a villa at Richmond, but something occurred to alter his wishes in this respect.

One night the Major arrived home earlier than usual, and even more intoxicated than was his wont. He burst into his wife's room, and when she remonstrated with him on his condition, most probably in no measured terms—for Jeanne's language, when enraged, could not be styled elegant—he took up the scissors from the dressing-table and threw them at her head. The aim was unfortunately good, and the result was a terrible gash in Mrs Flight's handsome face, extending from her right eye to her lip. The wound had to be sewn up by a surgeon, who declared sorrowfully that the lady would bear the mark till her dying day. On hearing of this accident and on beholding Jeanne's, seamed disfigured countenance, the passionate heart of the amative stockbroker beat slower, and he felt that he must part from her, whom he had assured twenty-four hours ago, that he so loved, that unless she promised to run off with him at the first opportunity, he should shoot himself.

Instead of repeating these charming sentiments with renewed ardour, now that his inamorata was in such a
sorry plight, he informed her that he was in receipt of a letter which had dashed his hopes to the ground, and which 'had brought him to his senses.' His beloved grandmother, he said, lay on her death-bed; he had been her favourite, and she had always admonished him most tenderly; at this moment his conscience smote him keenly when he pondered upon the wrong act he had been on the point of performing,—it caused him, indeed, a pang of regret to think how he had intended leading Mrs Flight astray—and with a saint-like expression, the hypocritical, fickle stockbroker bade her farewell for ever.

By-and-bye Jeanne's scar was not quite so unsightly, and she managed to attract a foppish young donkey, the son of an American, who had amassed great riches by running a dry goods' store, and so she sailed for New York with this booby, and Major Flight was left to drink himself to death—which indeed he did; so I was told.

Jeanne went from bad to worse, and the end was very dreadful. She was found clothed in filthy rags, stark and stiff, a hideous corpse, lying on the stone floor of a damp cellar in one of the slummiest streets in Paris;—so she had returned to her native city, the scene of her wicked triumphs, to die.

Miserable Jeanne! the closing page of her sin-stained earth life, does not stand alone eternally to point a moral—for, alas, thousands of her sisters' lives begin and finish in the same manner. Oh, the pity of it! That such white raiments should e'en become so sullied!

And still there must be the 'angel' hidden somewhere beneath. The radiant divine spark, the lovely spirit, almost smothered, but still there—still there to expand and blossom slowly but surely in the great never-ending hereafter.

You will imagine that I have forgotten about Cecilia? Not so, dear girls, but I thought it advisable to finish this part of my tale first, for to jump constantly back-
wards and forwards is apt to engender a good deal of confusion in a narrative. Do you not agree?

A fortnight passed before any tidings of Cecilia or the pretended ‘Count’ reached us, and then one day papa received a message from the head of the police to say that ‘Cecilia’ had been hunted out, but that the ‘Count’ had disappeared. And where do you think my poor sister had been hidden all this time? Why, in a fishing village on the west coast of Ireland. Papa went there to fetch her himself accompanied by a detective who had come down to Croft Manor to give the particulars of her discovery vivâ voce.

Poor, poor Cecilia, how it pains me when I recall to my memory her crushed and dejected appearance on her return home. She threw herself sobbing into my arms without uttering a word, and you can well believe that not a single reproach fell upon her ear; even the austere Miss Bacon was quite softened, although latterly I must in justice allow that she had grown singularly gentle. But in the face of such palpable heart-breaking shame and sorrow, who could continue stern and unmoved? Cecilia’s very lineaments seemed to have undergone a change; her beauty was wondrous still, but it was no more gorgeous in its overpowering dazzling brilliancy, the splendour of the burnished fiery hair remained, but that was all; the skin had assumed a livid ashen hue, deep dark rings encircled the eyes which shone out like twin stars, apparently larger than formerly because the visage that owned them had grown wan and shrunk. Cecilia’s loveliness, alas! appealed more to pity, than to any other sense, for she looked fragile as a drooping lily that has been dragged through the mire.

After she had been in our society for a while, and felt less awkwardly wretched, she, in reply to our affectionate questions, related all that had happened to her since she left us. She had been married next morning in the
church of a village about thirty miles distant. She was legally wedded, there was no mistake about that, for my father had carefully investigated the matter, but even before he had done so, Cecilia had been certain that she was indeed a wife. The clergymen bore the stamp of true and genuine priesthood on his whole personality, and there were two witnesses to the ceremony; the verger and the pew opener.

The Count signed his name as Francois Naurey. When Cecilia inquired the reason of this, he replied that Von Blitz was his title and his family name was Naurey, and that he had been christened Francois, after an ancient French ancestor, who had assisted in persecuting the Huguenots at the time of the Edict of Nantes. His mother, he added, being a protestant, as was he, objected strongly to an appellation which reminded her of such tyranny, and so preferred to call him Franz; his father, he went on to say, was by no means a bigoted Roman Catholic, and never interfered with his family's religious tenets.

Almost immediately after the marriage, the bridegroom exhibited temper because he was kept waiting for his dinner; the servant at the small inn not being very prompt or punctual. Shortly afterwards he flew into a towering rage with Cecilia—in fact, two days later, for the weighty reason that she had omitted to bring with her the few trinkets of value which she possessed, and which had been left her by darling mamma.

The 'Count' politely designated her 'a poor, brainless fool,' besides swearing at her like a trooper. My unfortunate sister certainly did not pass a delightful honey-moon, and had it not been that when Franz disappeared, he left her penniless, taking every sou with him, she would have experienced the greatest feeling of relief at his sudden flitting.

It was only when a strange gentleman, who turned out
to be a detective, arrived and desired an interview with her at once, and when this acute stranger gave her certain information, that she had any idea that Count von Blitz was a fictitious character, who had been transformed into a very real and notorious Francois Naurey. The shock she sustained on hearing this news, was most severe, both her affection and her pride were wounded in a way that it is hardly possible to conceive. She had loved unworthily; she had absconded from her childhood’s home with a low son of the people, who was not even respectable, but was actually a burglar! And she had supposed that this man had the bluest blood of Austria coursing through his aristocratic veins! What a come-down for Cecilia, the haughty ambitious Cecilia, who had ever held her head so high! What a cowardly creature was this hateful Franz, too; he deserted her without any warning (doubtless an accomplice had informed him that the police were on his track) and without bidding her farewell, he simply went out of the door, as if he meant to take a walk, and he did not return; naturally enough, he never penned his wife a single line later as this would have been very compromising.

Cecilia happened to notice that when he left the house he carried a small bag—an article which he always had with him, and which she supposed contained his letters and papers; but there was good reason for believing that the modest, unassuming receptacle was crammed full of jewels and money.

The Count was not captured, neither was it ever known to a certainty which country he selected as a secure haven of rest and retreat from the world which cannot afford to be generous to birds of his feather. I am, therefore, unable to enlighten you further as to the career of this cunning malefactor, or as to the subsequent fate of his sister Louise, who was set free and allowed to return to France. But I may add that a party of English ex-
plorers, who had wended their steps towards the heart of Africa, came suddenly upon a savage tribe, whose chief was undoubtedly a European, and one member of this searching crew, fancied that in the person of this feather-crowned warrior, he recognised the pretended 'Count von Blitz,' for he had remarked that notorious impostor at the Hampshire County Ball, and had been so impressed by his whole appearance, that he felt that he should know the 'Count' again, wherever and whenever it might be his fate to meet him.

I must ask you, dear girls, to prepare yourselves for the worst with regard to Cecilia. She was spared to us but for a short time; she lived to find that she was the mother of a still-born boy, and within twenty-four hours she was herself carried by the angels to a brighter star. It was enough to break our hearts, but perhaps it was for the best. 'Perhaps,' I say, when instead I should declare fervently and with gratitude that it was surely better so. For the Almighty Love which rules our lives, gathers into the spiritual gardens of the Infinite—the blessed flowery gardens where blows the balmy scented breeze, all those of His children whom He thinks fit to pluck away early; and don't you think that that Great Spirit of Love knows best? He who cares even for the little birds, whose thrilling songs are out-poured from the depths of their tiny souls? They soar up heavenwards here; shall they not find a place in the unclouded skies, and on the leafy evergreen trees of the beauteous better land?

I feel certain that my beloved sister would have been most unhappy, had she been destined to remain on earth, for after her marriage she was never more seen to smile, and her eyes were constantly bent down to the ground. She was the picture of misery, and whatever we said to comfort and cheer her was useless. She repeated over and over again, 'I am disgraced, eternally disgraced; the finger of scorn will point at me till I die.'
I missed Cecilia dreadfully, had I not done so I should have been a most unfeeling girl; and then her character was a very fascinating one, so versatile and full of witching changes. Her fits of temper even were alluring, they came and went so quickly, with such a fresh spontaneity, and who could not forgive the capricious whims and moods of such a perfectly lovely creature? Besides, beneath the surface, there lay real kindness of disposition, a too trusting simplicity, perhaps, but good principle, for Cecilia possessed a high moral standard, and it was owing to her trusting tenderness, and the Count's baneful magnetic influence, that she made such a fatal mistake and wrecked her life.
CHAPTER XIII

Three years passed slowly away after Cecilia's death, and one day seemed exactly like the other, until there occurred something which neither vexed me nor pleased me, for I did not feel that it would make much difference to me personally. The 'something' was this; papa and Miss Bacon announced their intention of being married.

When I was informed of this fact, I was not even much surprised, for although I did not altogether expect it, I was not unprepared, because papa had been so constantly in the good lady's company of late. He would take her out for long drives, from which she would return so radiantly beaming that it was a pleasure to behold her good-natured countenance; and then she would favour me with a lengthy oration, the theme of which was always papa's transcendent virtues. In fact these discourses—for I can call them by no other name—became so frequent, so incessant, that had they not somewhat amused me, the poor governess would have been an intolerable nuisance. Naturally both she and I dined every evening with papa, and after I had retired, Miss Bacon accompanied him on the piano, whilst he played on the cornet, in a manner, which I am unfilial enough to confess, was so excruciating that even when the sounds reached me in my bed, my teeth were set on edge.

The courtship and engagement were not of long duration, and the marriage was quietly solemnised in our small parish church.
It seems so strange that my father should for the third time have entered the bonds of wedlock, more especially when the results of his second venture were so disastrous, but it was probably this very reason which caused his choice to fall upon Miss Bacon, for she certainly never would wish to fly from him, and I imagine that the man did not exist who would experience the faintest desire to make love to, or to run away with the respectable, elderly Mrs Pyecroft No. 3.

I fancy that papa had grown very shy of ladies with taking, fetching little ways, of ladies who were surpassingly lovely, and who wore modish gowns and bonnets; certainly not even the poor governess's greatest enemy could accuse her of either beauty or taste. The poor woman was nothing less than an absolute fright, although she would have been still more irredeemably hideous, had her expression not been rather pleasant at times. As for her clothes they were simply appalling in their frank unmilitated, inartistic unfitness, both as to shape and colour.

I wish that some one would tell me, why the most uncomely and illproportioned of their sex, those whose hair is mousey, devoid of gloss and scanty, whose complexions resemble whitey-brown paper, those who have short waists and thick, or have lankey, May-pole figures; why do these persons so frequently dress in dirty shades of green, brown and grey, or in vivid yellows and blues? why do their gowns rarely fit, and where do they indulge in impossible feathers and flowers, and wrongly placed trimmings? Do the wily shop assistants retain all the inelegant, dingy, insipid or downright ugly things in reserve, ready to foist at a moment's notice upon the customers whom nature has not cast in pretty mould? Do these disingenuous, jesuitical vendors keep their unsaleable stock purposely in readiness for purchase by plain feminine creatures, in order to transform these unhappy ones into scarecrows? or is it not their fault?
it possible that ugliness and want of taste go hand in hand?

But to return to my tale. Once more was I blessed with a stepmother, but fortunately she was an improvement on the last importation, in fact she had not even been 'imported,' she was the rechauffé of the preceding day, the standing dish reappearing under a new form, and she was undeniably harmless, poor old thing.

I presume that papa belonged to the category of men, who feel themselves lost without a wife. I think that he wanted an affection that was 'all his own,' and that when he returned home from a ride or a walk he liked to be met with the special wifely smile—smiled in a particular way by the countenance which would not light so brilliantly for others. Decidedly he had been unable to feel this delightful flattering sensation of entire and exclusive appropriative monopoly with Jeanne, therefore he must have experienced a charming sense of security and self-satisfaction in his third marriage. And when a man is 'self-satisfied;' that is to say, when his male vanity (and men are vainer than women) is gratified, it will be observed that his temper is usually as sweet as sugar, and that he will beam benignly upon all the world, his female relatives included. I mention 'female relatives' advisedly, for in those cases where the little plant so firmly fixed in the masculine breast, has been neglected instead of being nurtured and fostered with care, the domestic womenkind will be the first to feel the egregious mistake they made in not tending the fragile bulb, for alas, upon their devoted heads does the fury of the dissatisfied, biped man first descend; on them does he vent the initiative strokes of his rising ire, and occasionally the whole course of it as well, with a grand explosion at the finish.

I really must say that the third Mrs Pyecroft managed papa most cleverly (had he fancied that he was managed, he would have been frantic). I never saw
him so thoroughly complacent and pleased before, and the wheels of the household being so carefully oiled all went smoothly and well. My old governess took a pride in me; she loved to see me look nice, she was delighted when I enjoyed myself, and when I was old enough she chaperoned me to the few dances and garden parties—few and far between—which the neighbourhood afforded, with unfeigned kindness. Matrimony had sweetened her temper completely, and I can honestly aver that she treated me with great consideration, and I cannot recollect that she uttered a single harsh word either to papa or to me.

You are anxious to know if I had many admirers. No, my dears, I cannot truthfully say that their number was great, and I laugh when I recall them to my mind—those comic swains that fluttered around me during the early years of my girlhood. There was the inevitable curate, a lean, washed-out looking youth with a receding forehead and clammy hands. He tried hard to cultivate an ascetic appearance, but somehow he only succeeded in acquiring the seedy, down-in-the-mouth aspect of the London cadger at his worst. When in the pulpit, his cod-fish eyes were invariably fixed upon my corner of the pew with a persistent stare which I found rather embarrassing, and he used to call at our house so frequently that I became positively bored.

Of course, on account of his cloth, Mr Shanks did not attend the county dances, but he was a feature at all the garden parties, and at these entertainments was in the habit of following me about like a little dog, although he was not little, he was tall and ungainly, with bowed legs and huge splay feet.

Papa and my new stepmother in common civility invited him to dinner occasionally, and I was obliged, for the sake of ordinary politeness, to play the accompaniments to the inane love songs which he warbled in his
miserable cracked tenor voice. You can conceive how annoyed I was by this young man's tiresome attentions, when I tell you that he irritated me so by his marked, ridiculous compliments and vapid conversation that I could hardly avoid being rude to him. Nevertheless, he was so horribly conceited, that he imagined that in reality I was not indifferent to him, and on the strength of this delusion, what did he do but write me a letter of proposal, over which I was wicked enough to laugh till I cried, and even the third Mrs Pyecroft thought it a good joke.

I didn't want to let papa into the secret, but she insisted, and after he had perused the epistle, he exclaimed that 'Mr Shanks was a deuced impudent fellow, to suppose for an instant that a Miss Pyecroft would smile upon him; he aspires too high,' he added.

I answered the poor curate's letter, and I refused him in the kindest way I could; (doubtless he considered me a brute, although I had certainly never encouraged him). I begged him to endeavour to forget me, and said that I trusted that we should be friends and that he would come to the house as before, although I fear that this wish of mine was not quite honest, for he was repulsive to me, and I should have been glad never more to have beheld him.

This desire was partly gratified, for Mr Shanks withdrew his foot almost entirely from our threshold. He paid a formal visit about once in three months, and always made an excuse when asked to dine. Evidently he felt that it would be better for his peace of mind, that we should meet as seldom as possible, and in about two years' time he was married to the blooming daughter of the local doctor.

I had another curious admirer in the shape of the eldest son of a neighbouring squire. This young man was nearly a dwarf in stature, and possessed of an abnormally
large head; he was almost as wide as he was long; he had a turned-up nose, and a rabbit mouth, whilst his small pig's eyes were continually sore at the lids, and whether it was to hide this blemish or whether his sight was defective, I cannot say, but at any rate he usually wore blue spectacles.

Mr Dawkins-Dawk was very clever in a dry-as-dust tedious way; whenever it was my fate to meet him he conversed about geology and all the other ologies. He was much too learned to care to investigate the trivial properties of soap and water, such commonplaces were far beneath him; consequently his ten finger nails were perpetually in sable mourning, literally begrimed with black. Wasn't it nasty? The wretch essayed to take possession of my hand on one occasion. I felt perfectly sick, and no wonder; is it? This budding squire in the middle of an explanation of the state of the earth, or of an account of the discovery of some ancient musty-fusty remains, would suddenly burst out into a eulogium of the charming qualities of my mind. He would descant upon my extraordinary intelligence, my profound understanding and acute intuition, (rather too acute to please him), and then he would drift into sentiment, and talk of the capacity and attributes of the heart. Most ingeniously then did Mr Dawkins-Dawk proceed to veer round from generalities to personalities, by no means in the same fashion as he had jumped from science to admire my brain power, but in a far more subtle manner, and arriving at his goal, by a far more circuitous route.

He would assure me that I was vastly superior to all other maidens, that I indeed possessed a soul; a soul which could love and hate (it was undoubtedly able to hate him) with equal intensity, and that in loving would demand an absolute and full return. Not every man, he declared, would be sufficiently enlightened; not every
man, in fact, was born with the nice perception, the discriminating judgment, to comprehend such a refined and tender nature as mine. And presently it transpired that he, Mr Dawkins-Dawk was impressed with the belief that he alone could understand my complicated and exceptional self, the ego that I had never attempted to analyse, or had imagined to contain anything distinct or peculiar.

I really did my best to turn the conversation, whenever the young gentleman sailed too near the wind, but it was a hard task, for he was one of those tenacious, obstinate mortals who would constantly return to a subject, in spite of all precautions and dodges. Therefore, as I had already feared and foreseen, one day he simply refused to be guided on to safer ground, and in a most uncouth and ridiculous way, asked me to be his wife then and there.

Naturally I declined the honour, when he pressed his suit with greater assiduity, and finding that I continued unmoved, he became quite overcome with his feelings. The tears coursed down his plump cheeks, making little raddled streaks thereon, for doubtless in reaching up for some moth-eaten old volume in his library bookshelves, he had shaken down some dust as well which had settled upon his face, and which he had not troubled himself to wash off. He cut a sorry figure, poor fellow, but my heart remained as hard as adamant or flint. I was an unkind puss, and all the worse, because if Mr Dawkins-Dawk had been handsome or even decently good-looking, I should most decidedly have experienced some slight sensation of pity for him; as it was I could scarcely refrain from bursting out with peals of laughter.

Youth is proverbially cruel; but all the same it must be allowed that it is quite impossible for a girl to accept a distasteful lover; why indeed should she? It would be exceedingly wrong.

You wish to know if the budding squire discontinued
his intimacy with our house? not entirely. I fancy he hoped his constancy would awaken my compassion, and that so he might win in the end, if he had only enough patience to play his game. But I tired him out, for I had not the slightest intention of favouring him, even if his courtship lasted for aye, and by-and-bye, after the lapse of many months, he turned his attentions elsewhere, and consoled himself, as men will, being often wiser in their generation than the feminine half of the creation. Therefore Mr Dawkins-Dawk followed in the footsteps of Mr Shanks, and became the joyful husband of a worthy and plain young woman, the daughter of the Colonel of the regiment which was quartered in the neighbouring town. Mr Shanks' wife was the more comely of the two ladies, otherwise I don't think that there was much to choose between them, and as far as I know, both couples lived happily ever after! My only wonder at the time was, that these two men should have found any girls who would take them—but then you see I was an uncharitable and fastidious minx! However, there were three faults to which I honestly could never plead guilty; they were malice, avarice and arrogance.

When I mention malice, I do not mean that I immediately forgot an injury, neither do I intend to convey the impression that I never disliked people intensely; indeed I was blessed with a fair memory, but to desire vengeance was at variance with my whole nature, although I think I have always been what is called ‘a good hater’ a very shocking thing to be, no doubt, and especially when that wicked person is a ‘good lover’ too, as I was.

It is not an uncommon phenomenon either to find the sentiments of love and hate strongly implanted in the same breast. As for greed—I simply did not understand it; I had enough and to spare in my young days and was better dressed than most of the girls in my own position, but any idea of pride of wealth never entered my little
head; I recognised that the poor were quite as good or better than the rich, and the purse proud persons disgusted me beyond measure; as for those who hoarded for the sake of hoarding and gave nothing away I considered that they were despicable. I daresay all the notions of my young mind were crude and that they toned down when I was older, for boys and girls do not as a rule make allowance, or permit the least margin for human weakness, they usually hit right and left, oblivious of their own little frailties. I am sure I was like all the other youthful descendants of Adam and Eve, and as cheerful too as they generally are, unless they have the toothache or some poignant sorrow, both of which pains, the physical and the moral being speedily cured by time the great healer; the one also occasionally by the agency of the dentist.
CHAPTER XIV.

Since I reached my seventeenth birthday, the world had treated me kindly, but it was too much to expect that it would ever so favour me, and it did not; instead of receiving a pretty present on the twentieth anniversary of the day, for papa had generally marked it in this fashion, I received not even a word of congratulation on my entrance to the breakfast room, but was greeted with a mournful silence. My stepmother was holding her handkerchief to her eyes, and papa looked so haggard, that I perceived immediately that he was racked by intense agony of mind and that something dreadful had happened. I was not mistaken.

'Your papa has been speculating and has lost every farthing' said my stepmother at length in a choking voice.

'What?' I exclaimed, my heart seeming to stop in its beat.

'For heaven's sake, don't look like that, Victoria,' said papa in the hoarse tones of despair, 'you make me feel as if I were a criminal—what have I done?—what have I done?' and pushing his chair violently back from the table, he rose and strode out of the room as if distracted.

Then I begged my stepmother to let me know all. She answered that we were paupers, that we literally had nothing; that my father had sunk all his money in some mines under the foolish impression that he was doing a
very good thing, and now the company had come to smash. She went on to say amid stifling sobs that Croft Manor would have to be let, and that papa meant to live on one of his own farms, just like a working yeoman, and that she would do all the cooking and cleaning, as best she could. As for me, she said that I must look out for a situation as lady’s companion immediately, for I was not sufficiently accomplished in her opinion to be a governess, unless to quite young children, besides she was aware that I much preferred kittens and puppies to little boys and girls.

You can hardly realise—you whose young lives have hitherto run evenly in pleasant lines,—how I felt under the crushing blow of our utter ruin. Fortunately I was a splendid sleeper, so that I made up at night for the waste of nerve tissue, or whatever it may be (for I am ignorant of physiology), that is so lavishly expended when one is harassed and worn by acute mental pain and anxiety. However, as I was what is called rather a strong minded young woman, I did not long give way, or sit with my hands idly before me, without endeavouring to help myself; on the contrary, I studied the columns of the daily journals, in the hope of soon finding something to suit me. Neither was it long before my researches were crowned with success.

One day when I was poring over the Times newspaper, the following advertisement caught my eye: ‘An elderly lady of position desires a companion; she must be young, of pleasing appearance and a gentlewoman by birth; also good tempered, obliging, musical, and a lover of parrots. Address by letter only to G. P., Swagger’s Library, 25 Holborn Bars, E.C.’

My heart bounded, for here seemed to be the very place for me. As to the requirements: I was certainly young; my appearance was said to be more than pleasing, for I had greatly improved during the last few years;
some called me extremely pretty, although I was far from being conceited. I belonged to a very old County family, too so that was all right. I believed that I was good-tempered and fairly obliging, as I had not heard to the contrary. I could also play rather well on the piano (of course the style would be old-fashioned and out of date now) and I was said to sing very sweetly in a low mezzo-soprano voice. There remained only one unanswered question—that of the 'parrots.' Was I able to reply in the affirmative? Did I love them? I felt that I could honestly say 'yes,' for although I had never had anything to do with their species, I adored the whole animal creation, in which they were included, so that my affection would certainly go out to them also on a near acquaintance. With delight, I directed my stepmother's attention to the advertisement, and she agreed with me that I ought to write to G. P. without a moment's delay, and she assisted me in concocting an epistle which she assured me was expressed and worded in the most correct and approved mode for a document of that description; and I consider she had every right to esteem herself an authority, for she must decidedly have penned many of the kind during her life. Anxiously did I await the answer; it came in four days' time, just when I was beginning to fear that my application had been in vain. I tore open the envelope which contained the important missive with the greatest impulsiveness. The writing was extremely neat and very scratchy; I had already observed this when I perused the address on the envelope. The paper was of the finest description, and bore a very imposing and grand red and gold monogram on the right hand corner of the sheet, whilst beneath was printed in the same mixture of colours,
and then with wild eagerness I read the following:

DEAR MADAM,

I have selected your letter out of the seventy-eight which I have had the pleasure of receiving, in order that I may give you the first choice of the situation of companion;—that is to say, of course, if I find that your person is as much to my taste as your penmanship—for the manner of expressing yourself, and the style altogether, convinced me at once that you were a gentlewoman, before I reached the signature, which speaks for itself, as your name is well known. I flatter myself that you will be perfectly happy with me, and most comfortable in my house. Naturally you will accompany me in my daily walks and drives, and I should expect you to assist me in my correspondence. You gave a full account of yourself, which has saved me a good deal of trouble, as I can pretty well understand your capabilities. I am glad that you are fond of animals and that you feel sure you would like my parrots; I have twelve of these charming pets, and they would be under your special care. Your musical talents will never need to be dormant, they will afford constant delight and amusement to my beloved birds, for I wish my companion to play and sing every morning for at least an hour to these darlings, and in this manner they are able to add to their already extensive and delightful repertory. As it would be impossible to enter into minute particulars by letter, I must ask you to come up to town to see me—say on Thursday next, so that unless I hear to the contrary, I shall expect you at some time that afternoon. Pray bring your trunks with you—because it is a long journey to undertake only for
SIR GASPARD’S AFFINITY

an interview—and if we seem to suit one another you can remain. I have forgotten to mention salary. I will give you £30 per annum, including laundry.

With compliments,

I remain, dear madam,

Yours to oblige,

(Mrs) Matilda Lavinia Grabber-Pounce.

This letter struck me as being rather open and genuine. I was on the whole favourably impressed by it; the salary offered me was certainly not high, and the clause about the musical entertainment which I should have to provide for the parrots, caused me so much mirth that for several moments I was simply convulsed with laughter. Of course I showed the important epistle to papa and my stepmother, and they agreed with me that it was frank and to the point. They thought that the good lady might, as she resided in such a fashionable locality as Russell Square, afford to remunerate her companion rather more solidly, but still, as I should in probability have a luxurious home with every comfort, it would be well to take that into consideration, and not to comment upon the small payment for my services, or dispute the matter. It was agreed that I should go up to town on the day fixed by Mrs Grabber-Pounce, for an interview, and papa determined to accompany me, as he wished to see for himself that everything was satisfactory, before he left me in the hands of an employer of whom he knew nothing.

My stepmother was sorry to part with me, and a few tears were shed by this kind-hearted creature when she bade me good-bye, but although I felt leaving the home of my childhood keenly, and regretted being separated from the affectionate old governess (for so I always thought of her) I could not weep; excitement kept me up. I had never been in London before, so you can perhaps imagine my feelings when I first beheld the
great metropolis. I was perfectly bewildered by the rush, the rattle and noise of the crowded thoroughfares as we drove quickly through them, and I was besides rendered miserable at witnessing the wretched condition of some of the horses, and the inhumanity of the drivers towards them. Twice did I poke my head through the window of our hackney coach to remonstrate with our coachman on the way he whipped his horse; on the second occasion I cried, heedless of papa's rather cross protests against such conduct, 'If you don't stop at once I shall get out.' My vehemence had the desired effect, however, and the man for the future allowed the miserable equine specimen to jog along at his own sweet will and at his own slow pace. I am afraid that the pace was too slow to please papa, who grew impatient, and only calmed down when we reached our destination.

The house before which the coach pulled up was a corner one with a wide frontage. It was built of red brick, picked out with white. The stone balconies were painted white and the area railings green; the front door was green to match, and there were two tremendous brass knockers embellished with dragon heads and wings, besides massive bell-handles to correspond, and the long extinguisher on either side, which is now a thing rarely to be seen except on very ancient houses whose owners cling to relics of bygone years.

I noticed that the windows were made gay with geraniums and mignonette, which were beautifully arranged in blue tiled boxes. The flowers bore evidence of care, and clearly demonstrated by their fresh bloom that they were not forgotten like so many of their fragile sisters, which are left to wither outside grand palatial abodes, for lack of the water which mistress and servants are alike too careless and too lazy to give them. We knocked and rang, our summons being instantly answered by a pompous stout butler, who was supported
by two satellites in the shape of a footman, resplendent in a red and green livery (most probably to match the parrots), his legs being incased in plush breeches and flesh-coloured silk hose, and a small page all over brass buttons, with a few buttons of a different kind disposed less symmetrically upon his cheeky countenance. We were solemnly ushered into the hall and up a fine staircase into a very spacious double drawing-room which was magnificently furnished, although not in the best of taste, as the curtains, cornices, chair covers and wall paper were all too ornate and gaudy. On a sofa of imposing size, gorgeous in a regal splendour of bright yellow and gold, sat, with her back to the light, an elderly lady. She was attired in a stiff slate grey silk, and from under the hem of her gown there peeped a pair of black morocco slippers with sandals and rosettes, whilst a fleeting glimpse of snowy stockings was just afforded the beholder. She wore a white gauzy fichu pinned together by a handsome gold brooch; round her neck was a thick gold watch chain, and on her glossy, faultlessly arranged dark chestnut-brown false front, with the three neat little curls at the ears, reposed a beautiful white net cap, most smartly concocted and befrilled; inclining to the left under the chin was tied a bow of cream satin ribbon, another to correspond being coquetishly placed on the top of the airy structure.

The lady's face was a good deal wrinkled, and presented the appearance of a sickly Normandy pippin; her features were well cut, but she had a cross, vinegary expression, and her steely deep-set eyes pierced coldly like the points of rapiers; she rose to greet us, and I saw that she was tall and gaunt.

'How de do!' she said, as she held out a thin rigid hand, in which every bone stood out prominently, reminding me unpleasantly of the articulated member of the end of a skeleton's arm, although, of course, this hand and its
fellow were thrust into white lace mittens and the fingers shone with rings, an opal and diamond marquise encircling the index. ‘You have greatly “obleeged” me by coming to town,’ continued the dame in her old-fashioned style of speech; ‘I need ’ardly tell you that I am Mrs Grabber-Pounce.’ Papa and I bowed; we had already grasped the fin that had been tendered us; I say fin, as there was no returning pressure.

‘You may be surprised that I do not pronounce the letter “h”’ pursued the lady; ‘as I find that some persons—h’m (here she coughed), who ought to know better, wonder at my dispensing with it; I will give you the reason: My family comes from Shropshire, and in that county the hideous letter “h” is silent; doubtless the custom is of French origin; we are of French extraction. My maiden name was “Pounce,” and being an heiress I retained it when I married dear Mr Thomas Grabber—alas, long since departed!’ and she sighed heavily.

I was certainly somewhat taken aback by the lady’s eccentricity, but on further conversation nothing particularly odd came to light, although naturally she alluded to my piano playing with reference to the dear parrots. I always consider that a love for animals is a pleasing trait in a person’s character, and that such a person will, as a rule, be found to possess a kindly and charitable disposition all round; however, I only discovered later that Mrs Grabber-Pounce’s affections were entirely fixed and centred upon her birds, and that she was almost destitute of feeling for any other portion of the creation. I only knew afterwards also, that the curious woman imagined that the spirits of her ancestors were lodged in the feathered bodies of those parrots. Her notions about these creatures, the excessive fondness she exhibited towards them—her attitude altogether in relation to them, constituted an unhealthy mad craze. But to return to the interview.
Mrs Grabber-Pounce seemed to be a very straightforward downright sort of woman, who expressed her thoughts and opinions openly. She explained with exactitude all that I should have to do, descending into details which were comic, and she assured me that 'I was altogether to her taste, so that if I was equally pleased with her, she trusted I would remain, and that I should not regret the step.' I had seen from the first that papa was favourably impressed and satisfied. He had noted that the old lady, curious though she might be, was a gentlewoman, and after she had treated us both to some most excellent sherry with dainty cakes and biscuits, served on a silver tray which was polished to a high degree of brightness, his contentment and universal benevolence increased in strides, and he presently turned to me and gave utterance to these sentiments, whilst on learning them, I knew that my fate (and I did not quarrel with it) was sealed.

'\nMy dear,' said he, 'you must consider yourself singularly fortunate in being chosen in this way by Mrs Grabber-Pounce. I really feel that I owe her a debt of gratitude (and he made a slight bow to the lady) for thus selecting you, for I can return home with a quiet mind, knowing that I have left you safely in good hands.'

My new mistress—for so I already esteemed her, and was not too proud to accord her that title in thought, as I should willingly have done by word of mouth if necessary, for she held that position towards me, and I never had any absurd pride, but wished every one to have his or her due; my new mistress, then, replied; most politely and amiably to papa's speech, and amidst general satisfaction he departed.

My father was never very demonstrative, but before leaving, he whispered to me that he trusted that I should not feel lonely, and that he was sure the old lady meant well. This was a good deal from him, and when he reached the door he nodded to me encouragingly.
I must own that for the remainder of that day, and for many successive days I indeed was overwhelmed with a sense of unutterable solitude, the kind of emotion of which a child may be sensible on finding itself for the first time at school, far from home and amongst complete strangers.

Mrs Grabber-Pounce was not sympathetic; she possessed, as I speedily discovered, a most selfish nature; she talked solely of herself, which proved almost conclusively that she thought only of herself, or chiefly, at any rate, to slightly modify the imputation. She was fussy and fidgety, and had tiresome fads. Of course I was compelled to give in to all her whims, and to endure her pettish ill-humours if she was cross, and she expected me to sink my own individuality completely, to become a mere cipher, for my tastes and feelings were as naught to her. She was paramount, the solar centre; I an insignificant star of such diminutive magnitude, that I must needs be merged and lost, like a nebulous planetary atom in the all-suffusing brightness of her glory; literally drawn therein by her powerful attraction (so she imagined), and made one with her in an inert and impersonal state of blissful Nirvana.
CHAPTER XV

Mrs Grabber-Pounce was certainly the toughest old lady I have ever met. She did not understand the meaning of the word 'fatigue,' she therefore failed to comprehend why it should affect me, or she pretended she could not comprehend, because she was acute enough to perceive that I was ill and dead tired, when one afternoon she forced me to amuse her parrots, after I had been reading aloud to her for more than an hour, whilst suffering from dreadful neuralgia. Several times did I raise my hand to my brow; she saw me wince, for she glanced at me furtively now and then, but she did not care.

' The dear parrots will be waiting for you, Miss Pyecroft,' she said, when I reached the end of a dull chapter. 'You 'ad better go to them, I think.'

'I am very sorry to say that I have a bad headache,' I replied, 'and I thought that you would perhaps allow me to postpone the birds' music lesson until to-morrow.'

The latter part of my sentence was altered falteringly, for I had observed that the expression on the face of my mistress had become singularly hard and unpleasant, and that she pressed her lips tightly together as if from annoyance. She coughed, and then said:

'Deary me, deary me! tut, tut, tut! Young people nowadays seem made of wax or barley sugar. When I was a girl I did not know what a headache meant; you should endeavour to conquer such paltry, fanciful ailments, or you
will never make your way in the world. It is the spleen, no doubt; everything is the spleen! No, I shall not let you off, Miss Pyecroft, it would be wrong of me to give in to your vapours. You have been spoilt at 'ome—that I have already gathered from your manner; you are too old to train now, but still I shall endeavour to improve you, if possible, and 'ave no intention of countenancing your nonsense; so will you please to go down-stairs at once and play to my darlings for three quarters of an hour; their company will effect a cure for all your imaginary ailments, I am sure!’ The lady delivered herself of these words in a spiteful way, and with the smile of a shark.

‘Very well, Mrs Grabber-Pounce,’ I answered quietly; and leaving her to her own devices, I descended to the library, where I was greeted by twelve screeching parrots. Their screams were piercing, and they went through my head like knives; it was terrible. At any other time on entering the room, I would notice the creatures, talk to them and scratch their polls, but to-day I could not do so; I sat down immediately at the piano and commenced to play the accustomed tunes which the birds delighted to hear; some of them whistled in unison, the rest continued their awful shrieking. I seemed to be in Sheol, but it was useless to murmur, the thing had to be done; so like a stoic, I continued strumming, for if I ceased Mrs Grabber-Pounce would be aware of the fact, as the drawing-room was just above.

At last it was over and I was free—free for a short spell to do as I pleased. I rushed up to my room and bathed my temples with toilet vinegar and water, then I laid myself down on my bed, and shutting my eyes did my utmost to think of nothing for a little while. But peace could not last for ever; it was five o’clock and I must return to duty and my capricious mistress; she drank tea at this hour, and required me to make it for
her. I really believe that she was amongst the first who introduced this cheerful, cozy afternoon custom, and in consequence, she dined only at seven, which was unusually late for that period. When I re-entered the apartment, the old lady chuckled and remarked, ‘Now you ’ave earned your tea—you see it is on the table; be quick and pour in the ’ot water, for I am thirsty. I ’ave enjoyed ’earing you play, and the music must ’ave soothed your nerves;’ she chuckled again.

I told her that I was certainly better now, but did not add that no thanks were due to her.

Mrs Grabber-Pounce was at all times talkative, and loved to hear the sound of her own voice. She was not what is termed a good listener, and, in fact, constantly asked questions without waiting for the answers before again proceeding. She often paid not the slightest attention to what one said, yet she demanded the most rigid subservient attention from others when she spoke.

On the occasion of which I am speaking, Mrs Grabber-Pounce was more communicative even than usual. She informed me that she meditated arranging a charity concert to be given at her house, ‘for the association of knitters of woollen garments to the negroes.’ It struck me that to supply the aborigines with warm, winter clothing was a little unnecessary, considering that they lived continually under a blazing tropical sun, but I thought it safer to keep this opinion locked safely in my own breast. She went on to tell me that she should make out a list of ladies of the aristocracy to whom she wished me to write in her name, begging the favour and honour of their patronage in the affair. ‘Of course I must ’ave duchesses (I am acquainted with two, fortunately) marchionesses, countesses and other ladies of title,’ she said. ‘Their names will be inscribed in the paper and on the circular, and at the tail end, I must ’ave just a few plain missus’s not many, you know, as they don’t count
for much with the public at an entertainment of the kind.'

I thought that my mistress was very snobbish, but that was none of my business. She let me into all her secrets: in getting up the concert, she would incur no expense whatever; she would simply lend her house. She had no intention of offering even a cup of tea, or a glass of lemonade to either patroness or artist; the latter would all give their services gratis. Mrs Grabber-Pounce meant to stipulate that in engaging them; and when she apprised me of this fact, she laughed exultingly. After she had fully explained her line of action and plans, I perfectly understood the reason of this charitable venture; it was undertaken expressly from self-interested motives, and for the special glorification of Mrs Grabber-Pounce, who, without expending a penny, could pose as 'My Lady Bountiful,' whilst admiring parasites would surround her clamorously with songs of praise—sweet volatile incense ministered to her inordinate insatiable vanity.

She was terribly vain, this old woman, and horribly mean, at least where others were concerned, although I must allow that she spent very little on dress. Her gowns were turned and returned and dyed; her frightful bonnets picked to pieces over and over again, and re-modelled by her dowdy, unmodish maid into even worse monstrosities than before. Unfortunately she discovered one day that I was clever at making frills and bows, for she saw me doing a little millinery; the reuponnothing would satisfy her till I promised to concoct her a smart cap. I was too successful, because it became my duty thereafter to compose them for evermore, and I was not sufficiently malicious or wicked to fabricate some awful headgear, letting her suppose that the first had come out well from a stroke of luck, and that my hand
had in reality no cunning for the protecting skull improvers of ancient dames.

With respect to her table, servants’ liveries, and the appointment of her carriage, Mrs Grabber-Pounce was decidedly not economical. She was also excessively greedy, and she loved show. She drove her servants like slaves, neither did she allow me to remain idle. The forthcoming concert gave me plenty of hard work; I was glad when the day of the grand entertainment dawned, and still more pleased when it had passed and gone. It was a great success! The soprano opened her wide mouth and screamed like a peacock; the tenor ogled the prettiest women in the front row, with eyes either wildly staring out of his head in a frenzy of mad passion, or else half closed in amorous, languishing voluptuousness. The basso profundo bellowed like an enraged bull, and rolled his r’s Paddy fashion. The contralto sang flat, which added to the dirge-like melancholy of the ditties in the minor key, which she despairingly howled forth, as if she were undergoing torture in the lowest depths of Dante’s Inferno. The pianist, who appeared to have received some dread ghastly fright from which he had never recovered, or rallied, for his bristling fair hair stood out from his head, even perpendicularly from his forehead like the quills of a porcupine, thumped mercilessly upon the unoffending keys, as if he owed them a good grudge, which he was now repaying with devilish, revengeful rage, his nostrils were quivering, the veins stood out at his temples. He raised his hands and let them fall with a crashing noise, that one fancied would break the strings and rend asunder the whole mechanism of the instrument: but the next second, the same action was repeated without disastrous results. The violinist fiddled, performing as he did so, wonderful acrobatic feats with his nimble, supple fingers, amid frightful contortions of countenance. He frowned till his
eyebrows met fiercely, and the corners of his lips were drawn upwards or downwards, according to the direction chosen by his bow.

Meanwhile the audience talked scandal, whispered, giggled, or fanned themselves in sleepy silence. The fat dowagers scanned each other insolently through gold-rimmed eye-glasses, or severely scrutinised the correct straight and tightly-laced young ladies under the wings of rival chaperons. These damsels greeted one another effusively and affectionately when near, or bowed sweetly from a distance, the less amiable among them, I fear, sneeringly disparaging their 'dearest, darling friends' in hushed asides to their stout mamas. The ladies of high rank delightfully and condescendingly patronised those below them in the social scale, and these again played off their airs and graces upon poorer and still less important gentlewomen, whilst the new rich untitled ladies (there were but a few at this date whose fortunes had been made in slaves, for society was select then), or those whose husbands had recently been honoured by knighthoods, or baronetcies, toadied their more aristocratic sisters in a manner which was truly edifying. With the exception of a sprinkling of antique seasoned beaux, and of a few impecunious, dandyish fops, who, desirous of making their way to the front of society, and of being bidden to good feasts of pleasant viands, were hanging with the servility of flunkiedom on the skirts of any duchesses or dames of lofty degree, who were sufficiently foolish to appreciate their false interested chivalry of snobbishness. Besides these, men were conspicuous by their absence; just a handful of half-fledged youths of some standing were present, and these formed the supreme attraction for the young ladies, and were the cause of many heart-burnings, and of much envy and petty jealousy.

The company was too modish to maintain silence;
even during the singing there was a buzz as of bees or blue-bottle flies. I, a mere nonentity, a looker on, a woman of no importance, had nothing to do but to take mental inward notes, therefore I did not allow the opportunity to slip. I noticed how, if Lord Sliboots of Gambleton favoured Miss Silverbrand, by permitting her to listen rapturously to a selection of his vapid remarks, graciously lending his ear to the voluble flow of conversation, to which his clever sayings gave such impetus, I noticed then, that the Lady Euphemia Parkacre’s fair brow would cloud, and that she would dart from beauteous orbs a venomous glance in the direction of the charming object of the young nobleman’s attentions. I watched how the generality of blooming, fresh maidens fluttered and perked themselves up like canaries in the sun, whenever an eligible male strayed in their vicinity; some even plumed themselves and chirped, when the detrimentals appeared and then the linx-eyed dowagers plainly manifested their displeasure, and resembling furious, imperious Junos, or field marshals at the head of an army, essayed their utmost to intimidate these bold cavaliers, or in other words, skilfully endeavoured to rout the enemy, and cause them to refrain from their meditated plunder, and leave in safety the timid, inexperienced lambs under their maternal protection.

There was one man who impressed me strangely the moment he entered the room. I observed him at once, and found later that, in spite of myself, my eyes were wandering towards him; it was most tiresome. I failed to understand the reason, or only in part. Certainly, this man differed from others, he stood out in relief; the rest formed a blurred background, all more or less the same. Their faces expressed the love of material things, sensuality often too. They seemed to live but for the time being, to have no grand conception of life, no ideal towards which they were striving, and straining with
every fibre of their souls. They appeared to me to have selfishness stamped upon their physiognomies, and Earth, Earth, Earth, written all over them in big, coarse letters. With this brother, it was the reverse. Compared to him, they were wretched pigmies; he, a real man, born to take his place at the head of creation. Every line in his countenance denoted nobility of character, and the effacement of self. The grand spirit shone through his dark grey eyes. I felt sure that he was good, and certainly he must be gifted. A genius, perhaps, for the fire of intellect illuminated his features.

Doubtless, you will say that I was a romantic girl, and that all these ideas were the outcome of a fevered imagination, of a brain tired by the teasing of my worrying employer, but you will hear by and bye that my intuition led me to read that transparent, truthful face aright.

The gentleman passed close to the seat which I occupied at the further end of the apartment when he left, and he asked my pardon for brushing by me as he was compelled to do. He looked at me fixedly as he spoke, and a burning blush mounted from my cheeks to the roots of my hair, for I was sensible of the discomfort of it, although I could not view my own countenance.

Mrs Grabber-Pounce shook him warmly by the hand as he quitted the room for she was near the door, and not far from me. 'Good evening to you, Sir Gaspard,' I heard her say, 'good evening, and I trust you can dine with me on Thursday next?'

'I shall be charmed,' replied Sir Gaspard in a voice which I had already remarked was singularly pleasing, it was gentle in inflexion, and frank. The suavity of tone and manner forced their genuineness upon one, and were so different from the soft, purring intonation and slinking
ultra-obsequious deportment of the deceptive Count von Blitz.

After the concert Mrs Grabber-Pounce inquired if I had noticed Sir Gaspard Baxabert. She began to describe his appearance, before waiting for my answer, when I interrupted her, saying that I had observed him, and had heard her mention his Christian name.

‘Yes, ’e is my second cousin twice removed,’ she said; ‘a rising man, besides being positively fascinating.’

She spoke no more of him then, her mind being occupied with arithmetical problems, and I found that she was overjoyed at being able to hand over £160 to the ‘association of knitters,’ after having first reimbursed herself for the amount she had spent in hiring benches covered in red cloth, for the concert. I sincerely hope that the poor negroes were equally joyful when they received the woollen garments, with which she had so generously provided them. A few days later there arrived a letter from papa (postage was dear then so I did not get many), in which he told me that Croft Manor was let for a term of years, to Lord Calerton, and that although the rent did not quite reach the figure he (papa) anticipated, still it was by no means to be despised. He and my stepmother intended leaving the house as soon as possible for an adjacent farm, and they would be able to keep one servant, he said. He trusted that I was well and fairly happy. He regretted to hear that Mrs Grabber-Pounce was so exacting (I had written to tell him about her), but I must consider that I had a comfortable home, with many advantages which he was pleased to see that I had the sense to appreciate, and put in the balance against the disagreeables. I was wise to do so, and to realise that my employer’s fads and caprices were most trivial things in comparison with the luxurious blessings I enjoyed. My stepmother sent her fond love,
in which he joined, and he remained my affectionate father, Robert Pyecroft.

I couldn’t help being a little amused when I reached the words ‘luxurious blessings.’ Poor papa was aware that Mrs Grabber-Pounce kept a chef, and I knew that he must envy me the privilege of partaking of the dainty French dishes which were the result of the important functionary’s culinary art. Poor papa! My heart ached when I mused upon his changed lot. How he must miss those excellent dinners to which he had all his life been accustomed; was his frugal repast prepared by a maid-of-all-work, ‘an industrious general,’ I wondered? or did my stepmother experiment thereon? If so, I feared to think of the menu or the ‘dishing up,’ for the unfortunate egoverness would be sadly out of her element in the kitchen. As for myself, I cared not what I ate, so long as the fare was plain and wholesome, and so long as I was not served with under-done meat, rabbit, or the flesh of the unclean animal; for, although a Christian by persuasion, you know that I rather incline to the Jews as regards diet, yet I have never been able to discover that we have any nearer Jewish ancestors than those that are common to the whole human family; but I cannot tell you with certainty who they were, any more than any one else can; for I believe that it is almost universally conceded in these enlightened days that the story of Adam and Eve is allegorical. Now I think of it, the next time I sit down with a Mediumistic friend at Planchette, I will ask ‘who were our first parents.’ Perhaps some friendly spirit will inform me, although he might answer that ‘he did not know,’ for it is a mistake to suppose that spirits are omniscient, because even when we have cast off our earthly shells, we cannot suddenly acquire a knowledge of everything, nor shall we either, I imagine, for a very, very long period; ages probably. It may be that the spirits of mortals who once lived and breathed upon
other planets, could acquaint us with more facts relating to our puny selves and our globe, but they seldom honour us by returning to give us any news; sometimes they visit some favoured person, but alas, I am not one of their number!
CHAPTER XVI

Thursday arrived, on the evening of which Sir Gaspard Baxabert and a certain Mr Clapp were to dine at Russell Square. During the whole course of the day Mrs Grabber-Pounce was more irritatingly fussy than usual. She scolded the servants all round, nothing pleased her. Even when Monsieur Cholet came up to the morning-room, affectionately clutching a slate upon which he had carefully set down his numerous wants (for the good lady objected to articles of consumption being ordered promiscuously), when the chef entered, carrying also a strip of paper whereon were inscribed in his neat handwriting the most marvellous French names, denoting delicious, delicate and savoury mixtures, compounded of ordinary ingredients so disguised that they became metamorphosed into an extraordinary and unknown whole, the crabbed Mrs Grabber-Pounce took umbrage, and exclaimed crossly that ‘Monsieur Cholet was quite too extravagant, and that he had selected the very entrées and sweets that she abominated.’

She continued to rate him soundly, until at length throwing up his arms in wild despair, he cried ‘Madame is too difficult; I know not how to please her.’

Then a bright thought struck him. ‘I beg your pardon, madame,’ he said, ‘but if madame permits, I will to her give the most charming menu which I had the pleasure to arrange for my Lady Flutterdash when
her son the Viscount Sawney had twenty-one years—
when he became aged, I think you call it, madame.'

My mistress's vinegary face cleared; the astute chef
had won his game. The mention of Lady Flutterdash
who had the reputation of giving the best dinners in
London confounded and settled her entirely.

'Yes, Monsieur Chôlet might arrange the exact menu
of that renowned dinner;' and the gentleman bowed
himself out, radiant at the success of his brilliant idea.

Presently Mrs Grabber-Pounce gave me the whole
history of Sir Gaspard Baxabert. Once started on a
subject of her own choice she was most voluble, and
although she usually bored me to extinction, on this
occasion it was different. I was interested from the
outset, and took good care not to interrupt her. She
began by impressing upon me (as she had already done),
that Sir Gaspard was her second cousin, twice removed;
that his age was thirty-two, and that he was the 15th
Baronet; that the name could be traced back as far as
William the Conqueror, for that a certain Baron Raoul
de Baxabert came over with him; that a knight called
Gaspard de Baxabert fought under Richard Cœur
de Lion against the Saracens in Palestine, that the
family had resided for centuries at Bax Priory in Kent,
and that the baronetcy had been granted by James I.
in 1611, the year in which the title of baronet was first
given.

She went on to say that Sir Gaspard was very well off,
although not a millionaire, and that he was a member of
Parliament, having now held his seat for two years;
that he also took an active leading part in all philanthro-
pical movements. He was at this moment working hard
to get some law passed for the amelioration of the con-
dition of the working classes; she added that he loved
animals passionately, and did his utmost to establish their
rights.
These two last traits in Sir Gaspard's character appealed to me strongly. I longed to make his acquaintance, but then the bitter thought flashed across my mind, that I was but a poor companion—a menial,—in all probability not so well salaried as Mrs Grabber-Pounce's maid. Was it likely that a man in his position would deign to speak to me? Scarcely; I felt sure. Well, at least, I should have the pleasure of listening to his conversation, even if it were not addressed to me, and that in itself would be a great deal. I pondered thus, whilst compelled to pay a sort of semi-attention to my employer's now incoherent irrational talk. She had wandered away to the parrot subject; she said that all persons resembled different beasts (perhaps there was a little sense in that). She stated that the ancient Egyptians had held the cat sacred; the Brahmin venerates the cow, and so on. From these facts she drew the most illogical inferences, how, I cannot tell, and no one else either, I should imagine. The old lady was a trifle crazy in this respect; she declared that these people worshipped or revered animals because the souls of their ancestors returned to reside in those forms. Well, we certainly are aware that some Easterns believe in the transmigration of souls, but I don't believe the Egyptians held this theory, and decidedly the advanced Hindu does not either, as regards returning as animals. Then she persisted that as all her ancestors possessed large Roman noses or hooked noses, that, of course, after death their spirits entered into parrots. As for Sir Gaspard, the member in the centre of his countenance being straight, she feared his spirit would never take on the form of one of those favoured birds.

I hazarded the remark that in that case he might indeed esteem himself fortunate.

'Why?' said Mrs Grabber-Pounce excitedly, 'is it better then to be annihilated?'
'Is that the only alternative?' I queried. 'How terrible!' 'It is the sad and sober truth,' she replied. 'Unless on dying we progress in this manner, being constantly re-born under the form of birds and beasts, we shall become extinct, snuffed out like a candle. We cannot re-visit Earth as mortals before first undergoing this trial.' 'But how do you know?' I interrogated, half-amused and half-scared, for her expression was uncanny. 'Ow do I know? Why, I 'ave perused the most clever book on the 'Migration of Souls,' by Professor Fuddledom, that's 'ow I know, and I flatter myself that I grasped his meaning, even tho' I could not always comprehend his words and phrases. Now my grey parrot with the pink shading on 'is wings, 'e is the living image of my lamented great uncle, Silas Alphonso Pounce. You never be'eld such a likeness.' 'But, dear Mrs Grabber-Pounce, I sincerely hope that after death I may remain above, and that there will be no question of my being re-born either as a human being or as an animal. I'— She interrupted abruptly with: 'You can 'ope as much as you please, but that won't alter facts. And I forgot to say,' she added in sepulchral tones, shaking her skinny fore-finger, 'that unless you are careful to improve under your condition of beast or bird, you will descend lower and lower in grade at each re-incarnation. Why, you may get to be a serpent or goodness knows what! And the end will be that you will lose all consciousness for ever; lost, lost, lost, asleep, never more to wake. The sun will rise and set, the wind will softly blow, but where will you be? Nowhere.' She finished in a mysterious whisper, with fixed, glassy eyes. I shuddered, for she looked horrid, just like a resuscitated corpse; even at her best I occasionally remarked the ghastly resemblance to that fearful thing. Sometimes
when alone with her in a dimly-lighted room, I felt positively creepy; she was so angularly thin, and the parchment-hued skin was drawn so tightly over her sharp features. She required a lot of dressing, but even so, she repulsed me. She was not a pleasant object upon which to gaze, as are many kind, sweet-faced, altogether-sane old ladies.

On the day of which I have been speaking, I could listen patiently to this insensate, crack-brained drivel no longer. I endeavoured to turn the conversation, and succeeded. I asked about Mr Clapp.

'Mr Clapp was a very decent man, but somewhat singular,' she answered. I thought that he could not be more singular than she was. The subject pleased her; she quite warmed to it. She loved discussing her friends and acquaintances, especially if she could pick holes in them. This gentleman was a cynic and a misogynist, she said, however; although as a rule he shunned female society. He always dined with her when invited, but it was with the understanding that there was to be no set party. 'Of course you don't count,' she observed quite naturally, without the intention of offending.

I smiled inwardly.

She continued to say that 'Mr Clapp was most absent-minded; so much so, that a rumour had been circulated to the effect that on dining at a well-known restaurant, he had eaten his dinner backwards, for when the waiter presented the bill of fare, he asked for the cheese and savoury, and so on till he arrived at the soup, deaf to the servant's polite remonstrance.'

Having favoured me with these particulars, the ancient dame proceeded to give me minute instructions concerning the floral decorations for the drawing-room. (It was not the fashion then to place flowers on the dinner table). No one was allowed to undertake this duty but myself, and I found it excessively tedious, as no matter how I
SIR GASPARD'S AFFINITY

sorted the frail, lovely blooming exotics of which she purchased quantities, she was never satisfied, unless she happened to be in an unusually sweet temper. This afternoon, things were more trying than ever. I essayed my best to please her. At home, I was commended for my perfect taste in this work, but now every combination was wrong, 'frightful,' or it had 'no style.' A handsome console table stood at one end of the room. Upon this I had placed twelve vases which I had carefully filled with choice specimens and ferns. She marched up to them, and literary tore out flowers and foliage, scattering them on the carpet. I picked them up and tried a fresh arrangement, but she had made me very nervous, and before I could realise what had occurred, a most valuable china ornament fell to the ground and was smashed, shattered into a hundred atoms. My sleeve had caught in it, and knocked it over. The next moment, I felt a sound blow on my cheek. The irate Mrs Grabber-Pounce had slapped my face. I turned to her in indignation, my temper was roused this time.

'You have forgotten yourself,' I said, as quietly as circumstances would allow; 'surely such an act is unworthy of a gentlewoman.'

'You richly deserved it, and I 'ave no intention of apologising,' she retorted with spiteful vehemence.

'I never intended breaking the thing; it was pure accident; I meant to tell you that I was sorry, for of course it was costly and—'

'Don't trouble yourself to say anything further, you awkward country bumpkin,' she broke in; 'it was worth more than double your yearly salary—and I can't replace it, it was unique.' Thereupon the insulting old woman giving me a savage glance, walked out of the room.

I pondered musingly over the incident whilst finishing my flower work. What ought I to do? Pack up my things and leave the house immediately, or pass over the
occurrence, without ever referring to it again—treating it in fact as if it had never been? I decided to adopt the latter course, although I was a little uncertain if I were not a poor spirited creature for so doing. Still it seemed wiser than to fly home in a huff; this would vex my father sorely, when he trusted that I was comfortably settled, and he could ill afford to support me in idleness. Moreover I was well aware that ‘companionships’ did not turn up every day, and for what other situation was I qualified? Certainly none. My state of ignorant incapacity confronted, humbled, and oppressed me. I felt that I must pocket my pride, and remain under this roof. I further considered that after all, perhaps Mrs Grabber-Pounce was justly wrathful and aggrieved. It was careless of me to smash a priceless bit of porcelain, an article which the worthy upper housemaid had dusted daily yet never chipped. Yes, I was decidedly to blame, I knew that my movements were as a rule rather hasty and impulsive, the good Miss Bacon had constantly told me so, and had endeavoured vainly to make me adopt a more ‘moderate style’ as she termed it. But it was useless; I never could sail slowly across a room or glide with measured snail-like steps, nor could I force my hands and arms to conduct themselves in the precise ‘genteel’ fashion which she desired. I never could take five minutes to perform an action which could be easily achieved in one minute. I think my brain was too energetic to permit me to be so ultra-feminine, and my body followed the lead of my mind.

Having arrived at a fixed conclusion with respect to the offending Mrs Grabber-Pounce, I played and sang to the parrots as usual, and returned to the drawing-room by-and-bye to make her tea. The lady greeted me with a smile, such as it was, and began to ask me ‘what dress I should wear for dinner.’ This made matters all the easier for me; she elected to forget her vulgar rudeness,
I would do the same, so I answered pleasantly, telling her that I should put on my sprigged muslin gown; she chatted away most amicably until it was time to dress. When I reached my room, I scanned my countenance carefully in the mirror, perhaps it was fancy; but it seemed to me that there was more colour in the cheek upon which the furious dame had wreaked her vengeance; what fingers she possessed, skinny and claw-like talons they were; how well they matched her person and character!
CHAPTER XVII

I was rather late in making my entry to the drawing-room; both guests had arrived. There was only time for a hasty introduction, when the gong sounded and the butler threw the door wide open, and announced 'Dinner is served,' in stentorian tones. Naturally Mr Clapp conducted me to the dining-room. We preceded Sir Gaspard Baxabert and Mrs Grabber-Pounce in our downward route. Whilst at table, my cavalier sat next to me, then the hostess, with Sir Gaspard on her left, which is the correct place of honour for the principal gentleman, the right of the host being the seat of the chief lady, as you of course know. Sir Gaspard had bowed in the most graceful fashion I had ever seen when he was introduced to me, his manners were most courtly I thought; of course I had met but few people, still I believe they really were charming, even in those days when gentlemen unmistakably comported themselves as such, and did not resemble ostlers and grooms in their intercourse with ladies. Ah, my dears, I bewail the difference, and consider it a sign of decadence; I cannot tell what the true reason of the change may be, but I can't help thinking that the 'new woman' has something to answer for in the matter. Not the 'new woman,' who bravely frees herself to a certain extent from the fettering chains of circumscribed stultifying custom, in order to aid suffering humanity; or who, to gain a hearing to her plea for a more just treat-
ment of oppressed animals, dares to raise her voice in a crowded, mixed and hostile assembly, who half jeer at her angelic moral courage—a virtue in which man, is, as a rule, sadly and woefully deficient. She indeed stands on a pinnacle of purity; let cowards and fools sneeringly censure her; they shall not crush her spirit nor stifle the notes of her call, neither shall they trample her glorious mission under the iron heels of their earth-soiled feet, for they cannot smother what is divine. So she walks onward without faltering, in the footsteps of the Perfect One, whilst her soul is radiantly illuminated by the white glistening light that streams down from the sphere of Love.

It is another species of 'new woman,' to which I allude; the one commonly meant when the term is used. She, who exists for naught but pleasure, and who, selfish to the core, cares neither for the pain endured by mortals or by sentient creatures, so long as she gains something thereby. The semi-unsexed female, who can witness the butchery and mutilation of innocent doves, hares, pheasants, yea, even deer, unmoved; who, possessing scant respect for herself, demands none or little from others. What, forsooth, must be the emotions of the ordinary man, who watches a woman smoking long cigars, and sipping brandies and sodas, whilst her conversation is interlarded with slang of the least refined description, that conversation being chiefly composed of risqué jokes, vulgar innuendoes, or anecdotes gleaned from a careful perusal of the sickening, nauseous details of the latest divorce case, or kindred nastiness? Such a specimen of womanhood must surely exert a baneful influence upon the sex which requires to be raised and not to be lowered.

But as usual, I have wandered from my subject; I humbly apologise. I was carried away by my feelings. You desire a graphic description of Mr Clapp? Well, then, he was a middle-aged, thick-set man, inclining to
corpulency: he had a large, round, red face, gooseberry eyes, and a shining bald head; his eyebrows and lashes were of a bright shade of ginger, also his whiskers. He was remarkably bashful and silent, in fact, a terrible bore. I started topic after topic, but was only rewarded by a kind of snorting grunt, or by a curt 'yes,' or 'no.' It was not encouraging, and the conversation at the other side of the table was so animated, that it was tantalising too, to find oneself seated by such a laconic individual. I said to myself that as he hated women, of course he detested me; the situation was not particularly hopeful.

Mr Clapp certainly had funny ways. He was so absent-minded that he ate the poached egg in his soup with a knife and fork, and endeavoured to scoop up the liquid with the latter instrument; he got on fairly well during the remainder of the repast, until ramequins were handed round. Whether he had never previously beheld them, I cannot say, but he endangered his life by making frantic efforts to swallow the paper. I did not feel equal to witnessing a case of suicide; I therefore assured him that he was troubling himself too much, and that only the interior of the case was intended to be consumed.

'Oh, really!' he replied in a drawling voice, as he pushed his plate further on to the table, in a manner which caused the butler, footman and page to stare at him with undisguised horror portrayed on their usually impassive countenances.

When we arrived at the dessert Sir Gaspard talked to me across the table; he had already hazarded one or two remarks, but before I could reply Mrs Grabber-Pounce had each time literally answered for me, whilst she immediately asked him some question, showering such an incessant fire of speech at his head, that he could not get rid of her. She reminded me of a chattering baboon at the Zoo. However, when the servants had left the room, Sir Gaspard would have no more of it, and it was
useless for the old lady to try to chime in as he was
clever enough to choose subjects of which she knew
nothing, so, subsiding altogether, she turned to Mr Clapp
and gave him the benefit of her prating tongue, which
produced a never-ending supply of babbling tittle-tattle.
I believe she would have cackled to a barber's block, so
long as it had a pair of ears! As for Mr Clapp he simply
nodded his head at intervals like a mandarin. I neither
knew nor cared what Mrs Grabber-Pounce was saying;
I was deeply interested in Sir Gaspard's conversation and
in himself.

Of course you wish to know exactly what he was like
when he was young, for you are so well acquainted with
his dear face now, that it is odd. You can imagine how
odd it seems to me to speak of him as 'Sir Gaspard,'
but so he was to me then, and if I called him otherwise,
I think it would spoil my tale. Can't you fancy how he
looked in his prime? I don't think his figure has altered
much, he is still tall and erect. The beaux in his time used
to inquire 'who was his tailor' but even if they employed
that artistic tradesman, they discovered that something
was missing which he was unable to create, for it was
beyond his powers; the garments were the same as those
worn by their 'model' yet not the same on them; it was
very sad. Sir Gaspard's countenance has not changed to
my mind, excepting, of course, that time has traced a few
lines in it which were absent then. Has he not lovely
thick hair? Even at the age of thirty-two it was
streaked with grey; probably from deep thought. He
had always had kind eyes; 'fine eyes' they were; I
have heard people say this, and it was true then. He is
a handsome old man now, and he has never visited a
dentist in his life, which is more than some youthful
folks can boast!

I am able to recall much of what Sir Gaspard said on
that memorable evening. He talked to me until we
left the dining-room, and later in the drawing-room, also, he drew a chair close to mine and related a great part of his life, whilst Mrs Grabber-Pounce was comfortably dozing, for I think the champagne had been a little too much for her; I mean that it had induced sleep. Mr Clapp crept round the room examining all the pictures and china, and as there were plenty of both, and he devoted minutes innumerable to each separate article, he was thoroughly well occupied. What an odd man he was! Every now and then he would come up softly behind us on tip-toe, and say, 'You seem to be getting on like steam!' It was most awkward and embarrassing. I pretended not to hear, and dared not so much as glance at Sir Gaspard. Of course I blushed furiously.

'You are fond of china?' That was my companion's retort to the other's strange remark on each occasion.

'Yes,' replied Mr Clapp.

'Young lady,' he observed presently, 'you have common sense, I should say very unusual for a young lady, very!' and he returned to his harmless amusement.

I thought Mrs Grabber-Pounce's old crusted port must have mounted to good Mr Clapp's head, for his former shyness had entirely vanished.

'Are you attached to that ancient skin-flint?' he whispered, having again softly and unexpectedly approached me. As he spoke he pointed in the direction of my slumbering mistress, and there was a merry twinkle in his eye.

I answered cautiously, 'that I had not long been with her.' He retreated backwards, shaking his head in such a knowing way, that I was almost convulsed with laughter.

'He is a queer sort of fellow,' remarked Sir Gaspard in low tones; 'it is useless to pay attention to anything he says. I have known him almost all my life, but I have
never before seen him so lively. Mrs Grabber-Pounce's wine is uncommonly potent, you understand! We both smiled.

Sir Gaspard not only told me a great deal about himself, but he evinced great interest in all that concerned me. He said that he had known my dear mother slightly; this, of course, created a bond of union between us. Naturally, he had too much delicacy of feeling to openly pity my changed condition—my circumstances; but I knew that he felt sorry for me. There was a gentleness and a more than ordinary deference displayed in speech and manner, fine shades which did not escape me, and I remember that he admired the white roses which I wore tucked into my sash, saying that white was his favourite colour.

Altogether, I passed a happy evening—I do not say 'enjoyable' because that word does not properly express the meaning I wish to convey. Many a time had I previously enjoyed myself, but that night the pleasure was of a different description, peaceful, yet thrilling, and I wished that the clock would stop and that the hours would resolve themselves into days, so that the moments of Sir Gaspard Baxabert's tarrying might be indefinitely spun out, for never more could I hope for such gladness.

This man seemed to comprehend my unspoken thoughts; his, I, too, appeared to guess rightly. His aims were so high that I was half dazzled by their grandeur. He was strangely oblivious of self, for he worked so hard that he usually rose at six o'clock in the morning and barely gave himself time for his meals; constantly being compelled to leave his food untouched owing to pressure of business. And labouring solely for others; he gave his money cheerfully without a thought of any return. He ardently longed to raise the world, and to force the growth of all that was highest and best in man. He made the most strenuous efforts to get bills passed for the
abolition of cruelty to animals in all its branches, and would sit up far into the night composing speeches, with which he meditated electrifying the House of Commons next day, speeches for helpless creatures that were unable to speak for themselves, and demand justice. He visited asylums, workhouses and hospitals, in order to ascertain if the inmates received their due. He built dwellings for the poor, and assisted in establishing comfortable alms-houses for those who were past work. He gave the parson of the parish in which he resided, not only at Bax, but in London, *carte blanche,* to send to his cook for soup or anything that was required for the sick. All these details I gathered in the course of conversation, but it must not be supposed that Sir Gaspard thrust them under my notice; on the contrary, he was modest and unassuming to a degree (just as he is now), and he responded in his gentle simple way to my inquiries, for my interest was amazingly roused and excited. I beheld before me nothing less than a 'reformer' who had arisen from amongst the great in the land; I was filled with wonder!

When Mrs Grabber-Pounce at last awoke with her cap all awry, I sighed inwardly and my heart sank, for the end of my 'good things' had come. Sir Gaspard rose, and placing himself near the old lady conversed with her for a little while, and then departed.

'I cannot tell you how glad I am to have made your acquaintance, or with what pleasure I shall look back on our talk,' he said as he bade me adieu.

I trembled with delight as these words left his lips, but when the door closed upon him, the joy fled. I felt how foolish I was to be so pleased at an ordinary civil speech. He had gone, I should in all probability never see him again, and I felt sad, very sad indeed. Then Mr Clapp bowed himself out in his clownish way, and my mistress, who had nearly fallen asleep once more in her arm-chair,
get up slowly, with the gradual movement of an unoiled hinge, minus the squeaking, and intimated to me her intention of retiring for the night.

Mrs Grabber-Pounce was dreadfully fond of ceremony. I had now to ring the bell, which duty I was obliged to perform between the hours of half-past ten and half-past eleven p.m., all through the week. We then waited for about five minutes. After this period had elapsed, the ancient dame walked towards the door, reminding me as she did so, of one of those stiff-jointed dolls. In the corridor were ranged the butler and footman with upturned noses and lighted candles held at about the same angle; the major domo gracefully handed the one in his grasp to his mistress, whilst his subordinate gave the other to me, as I followed her from the room. Servants strongly object to waiting upon governesses and companions, whom they class with themselves, and the footman possessed the prejudices of his confraternity, for I invariably detected a badly disguised, disrespectful sneer on his countenance, whenever he offered me this, or any service.

It was about a quarter to twelve when our last guest departed. I was never very long undressing, and I usually slept as soon as I had placed my head on the pillow; not so, after this dinner; I don't think sleep closed my watchful eyes before four o'clock in the morning.

'Because you had fallen in love with Sir Gaspard, dear Grannie!' you cry.

Well, my dears, I fear that you have guessed the truth and that I had indeed become a victim to the pretty little boy with the wings, but that sly cupid had awakened different and deeper feelings from those which are often dignified with the sweet name of "love." In the first place I felt drawn towards Sir Gaspard by intense respect, with a capital R; it was his character which attracted me far more than either his charm of person-
ality or manner, although I won't say for a moment that these did not count with me also very much. Of course I appreciated them fully, as any other girl would have done, neither do I wish you to fancy that I was a "paragon of perfection!" I was no such thing. I only want you to understand that I could not have cared for a man who was unprincipled, who lived on a low level without aspirations, or to whom actions of benevolence were things unknown; the sort of man who would perhaps work himself to the bone from self-interest, and who might be equally energetic where his pleasures were concerned, but who would not lift so much as a finger to benefit either a fellow creature or an animal. To that selfish mortal my affections could never go out. I always had an ideal. You know my secret, and I mean to reveal Sir Gaspard's; he won't be angry, I can answer for that.

This is his secret then; he fell desperately in love with me on the evening that he dined at 16 Russell Square, and when he bade me adieu he determined within himself that it should not be for long—in fact, he told me since, that he made up his mind, then and there, that I should be his wife. So there! Now I can breathe, for I don't choose to be thought a bold, young hussy who gave her heart away when it was not wanted, and before a man had made any advances at all. If Sir Gaspard, instead of becoming a wooer, had gone to Jamaica or never come near me again, or indeed if he had come and I had seen he didn't care, why, of course, naturally I should not have given him another thought. 'You are laughing; what rude girls!'

'You are so funny! You say. "How could you help liking dear grandpapa—and still more, how can he have helped loving you?" Why, you must have been the very dearest, loveliest, sweetest girl that ever was seen!'
Hush, hush, you silly flattering things, I was nothing of the kind. I have a latent idea that Sir Gaspard said something very like that a little later, but then, poor fellow, he probably hardly knew what he was saying!

I suppose you are dying to know all about it. Yes; I will relate how it came to pass that we were married, but if you imagine that I am going to tell you all he said to me, or all that I said to him, you are very much mistaken, for such things are very sacred, the remembrance of them is in my soul. They are treasured up there in a casket into which none may break or intrude. It would be a kind of sacrilege to drag them to the light. I can't do it even for you that I love so fondly, neither would you wish it!

'When did I next behold Sir Gaspard?' He called three days later. He was on the doorstep just as Mrs Grabber-Pounce and I returned from our drive in her grand chariot. The old lady seemed charmed to see him, and invited him in, of course. He sat with us for an hour or more, but Mrs Grabber-Pounce talked so much that I could hardly get in a word edgeway. Sir Gaspard endeavoured to talk to me, but it was impossible, she would not allow it. It would have sounded incredible to her then, if any one had said that Sir Gaspard really desired to speak to me. She looked upon me as a kind of inferior article of furniture, and constantly informed me 'that I was in a way useful, but not brilliant, that my notions were countrified, and my conversation tedious.' So, as poor Sir Gaspard found my worthy mistress a trifle too tedious, he at length took up his hat and went, much to my grief; but I must own that my heart bounded, when, with his hand on the door handle, he turned, and as if from an after thought, remarked, 'I sha hope to call again very shortly, Mrs Grabber-Pounce.
Your tea is so excellent, and one is so seldom treated to it at this hour.'

'Dear Sir Gaspard—delighted—do come often!' replied the lady.

He bowed, smiled, and was gone.
CHAPTER XVIII

On the following afternoon Mrs Grabber-Pounce went out to pay some visits to some of her more important friends, and before leaving she informed me 'that she should not trouble me to accompany her, as I should have to wait so long in the carriage whilst she was in the different houses, and that she certainly could not take me in with her, as the ladies would not care to receive a person of my standing.'

I passed over this insolent speech in silence.

Really I was delighted when Mrs Grabber-Pounce's back was turned, for then only could I have a little peace and quiet. I wrote a letter to papa, and then I settled myself in a corner with an interesting book. Hardly had I turned over the first page, when the butler entered, and with a grand and condescending air, informed me that Mr Clapp wished to see me.

'He first inquired for Mrs Grabber-Pounce,' he said, 'but as I informed him she was hout he asked for you, so I said I would see if you was within.'

At that juncture another head became visible, and a voice which proceeded from behind the major domo cried in squeaking tones: 'It is I, dear Miss Pyecroft; may I come in?' which the owner of the squeaking organ at once did, without waiting for permission. The butler politely stepped aside and held the door open for Mr Clapp to enter.
My astonishment was unbounded. He sat down and began mopping his face, for the weather was warm and his manners unpolished; doubtless they were never very finished and had lost even their primary and rudimental coat of varnish from the monkish recluse-like existence which he usually led.

‘How de do, Miss Pyecroft, how de do,’ he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat. How’s the old dragon, the gorgon? Gone out, I hear, he, he, he!’ and he laughed after the fashion of a hyæna with a bad cold.

I could scarcely believe my ears. ‘Mr Clapp, I really do not understand to whom you refer,’ I replied stiffly, without the ghost of a smile, although it cost me a great effort to retain my composure.

‘Oh yes, my little missy, you cannot fail to comprehend me,’ he continued jocosely. ‘It is the Grabber-Pounce, I mean; there never could be but one, so I designate her by the definite article!’

Much as I disliked my employer, I could not make fun of her behind her back, nor allow her to be ridiculed in my presence; I was too loyal for that. ‘I must really beg of you to speak more respectfully of Mrs Grabber-Pounce,’ I said; ‘it doesn’t seem right to laugh at her, more especially when you have so recently partaken of her hospitality. Forgive me for reminding you of this fact.’

‘Oh, ah!’ he stuttered. ‘To be sure, yes. Very true; doubtless it was wrong of me, but the whole of London society is acquainted with the Grabber and her ways; a nice time of it my poor old friend Thomas had, I can tell you—her husband you know—and she might have been decently grateful, for he heaped and loaded her with bountiful kindness; and what was she when he married her? Nothing at all; the daughter of a tallow-chandler or something of that sort. And now just look
at her; remark her airs and graces, if you please. The vulgarity of the woman!

‘Hush, hush,’ Mr Clapp, I interposed.

‘My dear young lady the story is too good, I insist upon your listening to it.’ And as I rose from the little low ottoman in the corner, he literally placed himself in front of me to form a barricade for fear of my leaving him, and indeed I had almost thought it might be best to leave the room. However, I resumed my seat; it seemed the wisest course to pursue; also I was curious—I wondered what the tale could be. ‘Just before the concert,’ commenced Mr Clapp, ‘the Grabber called upon a mutual friend, an excellent motherly woman of the name of Mrs Wicks; “Mrs Wicks” said she, “I have a favour to ask of you. You have heard about my concert? Well, I have a list of patronesses about a yard long, all titled ladies, not a commoner’s wife amongst them, but you see I must have some plain missus’s; will you be one of them? Do lend me your name, dear Mrs Wicks,” and the good creature was too good-natured to refuse the Grabber, she actually consented. But she had her small revenge all the same. She told me, and she told Lady Norah de Montville, so the story was soon noised abroad, he, he, he!’

This time I joined in Mr Clapp’s innocent merriment. I could not resist doing so; besides, I recollected the good lady’s remark to me on the subject.

‘Snobbish old cat!’ continued Mr Clapp, ‘old vixen—worried her last companion almost into her grave, poor thing; had to return home on sick leave, and never came back. Needy parents, yet old Grabber didn’t give her a brass farthing besides the few pence that were owing to her; disgusting, positively disgusting!’

So I thought, but I reproached myself for having listened so long, I must bring this disparaging conversation to an end. ‘Look here, Mr Clapp,’ I observed with
firmness; ' if the only object of your visit was to abuse my employer, I must beg you to withdraw; Mrs Grabber-Pounce may have her weaknesses, but it is not for me to remain quiescent whilst they are being retailed.' I again rose, and moved forward, plainly intimating that I expected him to let me by.

'No, no, dear Miss Pyecroft,' he exclaimed with an imploring gesture, while, at the same time, he walked further away, so that I had plenty of space to pass out of my corner, if I elected to do so. 'No, most loyal and gentle of young ladies,' he pursued with much earnestness and excitement, 'the reason of my visit is far, far different. You and you alone are the cause of my appearance. I, who have hitherto loathed the sight of women, worship the very ground that is trodden by your tiny feet.' Mine were not so extraordinarily diminutive! 'Only once have I beheld you before, and then my heart was pierced through and through by the shaft of your pure heavenly eyes. Goodness beams from you; it is not your beauty alone which touches me; it is your worth.' These words amused me greatly, although, I felt a little bit sorry for the poor silly man.

' Mr Clapp,' I interposed, 'pray stop—it is such nonsense, I—'

'Indeed, no,' he broke in, 'it is grim reality.' Here was another comic expression. 'When I first met you I couldn't find my voice. I never can in the presence of your sex, but now I feel that I am an orator. You have furnished my thoughts with wings; I seem to be flying away like a gorgeous butterfly. I who was formed a dull, dingy grub! I have never uttered so many words to any lady in the whole course of my life. And now for business. I was brought up as a business man, you know. I have exactly two thousand, five hundred pounds per annum. You shall have one thousand for your pin money, and for the servants' wages, and your general
expenditure — because, mind you, I will hear nothing about housekeeping, you understand, Miss Pyecroft?'

Here he shot out one arm violently and shook his hand in my face. 'And I wish to save you from being murdered by the Grabber. Be my wife, dear angel! Will you?' Then he flopped down upon his knees; his countenance had grown more rubicund than ever from the unwonted exertion, mental and physical. The drops of perspiration glistened on his forehead, and on the round top of his shiny nose. His mouth was open, and the uneven, smoke-discoloured teeth stood out in hideous array. Truly he was an object for great compassion, but not for love; had I not pitied him I should have laughed.

'Get up, for goodness sake, get up, Mr Clapp,' I cried. 'Mrs Grabber-Pounce may return at any moment, and what will she say if she finds you in such a ridiculous attitude? I feel greatly honoured by your preference, I assure you, but considering our short acquaintance, don't you agree that you have been a little hasty? After due reflection I am sure you will be the first to say so. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, and trust we may ever be good friends. You are very kind, very. As for this occurrence, let us blot it out. I want to treat it as if it had never been—do you see?'

Mr Clapp sighed heavily, and resumed his normal posture. 'Is it no use?' he queried dejectedly.

'I fear of no use whatever,' I replied with decision.

'Don't you care for me or feel that you could come to care for me?' he inquired.

'Never, never, never as you would wish,' I answered, with even more insistence, although gently. 'One cannot command one's affections, and in truth—for I feel it is best to be cruel—if you were to go on proposing to me till the end of your life, my reply would be the same
as it is now—no, a thousand times no.' I spoke plainly for I saw that it was necessary to do so.

He coloured even more deeply, becoming purple. 'Well, you are an honest spoken young woman; after all, you gave me no encouragement, and I suppose I was too ambitious—my heart—' he faltered, 'my heart is broken!'

'You will find it will mend again in time, Mr Clapp. But believe me when I assure you that I am sorry, very.'

He held out his hand. 'Goodbye, dear Miss Pyecroft—I promise you to be your true friend—' his voice broke. I really felt grieved. I took his hand; he pressed my fingers in his, and in the next second was gone.

A few minutes later Mrs Grabber-Pounce returned, but I did not acquaint her of the fact of the special visit which had been paid me; doubtless she found the gentleman's cards left for her in the hall, as a matter of course, and made no inquiries of the butler.
On the next morning Mrs Grabber-Pounce requested me to go out and execute some commissions for her. I was to call at the dressmaker’s, the linendraper’s, and the florist’s, in order to leave messages or to pay bills.

It was a lovely day although somewhat warm, and I was only too delighted to be able to enjoy a little freedom. At that time, it was customary for all girls of the least position to be chaperoned by mamma, or by an elderly female of some kind, even during an early stroll, before the world of fashion was awake. Ladies of more mature age even, would never stir from the house unless they were followed, ‘shadowed, as it were,’ very closely by a stalwart lacquey, who, on a Sunday, might be viewed haughtily carrying his mistress’s thick prayer-book, while she strutted on in front, on her way to perform her weekly devotions at church, rigged out in all her finery, like a peacock. However, as I was ‘nobody at all,’ nothing but a ‘genteel, insignificant, paid, companion,’ I was permitted to roam about unattended at my own sweet will, whenever my mistress desired to dispense with my company, either at home or abroad.

I now went to all the establishments which she honoured with her august patronage, according to the orders I had received, and was much diverted by the behaviour of the florist, who, after having politely invited me into his back parlour, for what reason I at first could not imagine, handed me a few coppers as commission on
the account, in addition to the correct change for my mistress. I civilly declined to accept his generosity, whereupon he first stared, and then looked sheepishly foolish. I presume that at cursory glance he had taken me for the housekeeper, but I did not feel injured in the least.

Having gone the round which had been marked out for me, I wended my way to Wigmore Street, where was situated one of the most fashionable boot and shoe shops in the Metropolis. If there was one article of dress upon which I expended extra care, and maybe cash also, it was foot-gear. I was particular both as to cut and shape, and could not put up with an inferior make and quality; therefore, whenever I required a new pair of shoes, I visited the emporium of the great Monsieur Vidal, the Polish purveyor of French goods in this line.

On entering the shop I had to pass through the gentleman’s department, which was next the street, to enter the ladies’ department at the back. On this occasion, having been satisfactorily fitted, and having been flattered by the astute shopman who patronisingly volunteered to remark that it was not every lady who possessed such a neat foot as madam, I was just quitting the place with my purchase tied up in a tidy parcel in my hand, when I was greeted with ‘Good morning, Miss Pyecroft, this is indeed a pleasant surprise!’ The voice was Sir Gaspard Baxabert’s and he stood at the entrance of the establishment. There was the usual kind smile in his eyes as he spoke, and, dear me, how smart he looked; he made me feel a regular dowdy! I returned his greeting. Then he told me that he had meant to order some boots, but that he would put off that prosaic action till another time, and that, if I would allow him to do so, he would accompany me in my walk home.
You can imagine that I was nothing loth, and I may add that the naughty Sir Gaspard objected to conducting me back by the shortest route. He made all kinds of excuses in order to induce me to take a more circuitous one, and I fear that I consented to his wishes in this respect. I told you that I considered I presented a dowdy appearance, but before we reached Russell Square, he informed me to the contrary, telling me that I was the personification of elegant simplicity, and that he trusted I should not be offended by his boldness, if he ventured to admire my bonnet, which, according to his ideas, was in perfect taste.

These little remarks of his, I have no objection to repeating. You are anxious to know what I wore? The gown was of royal blue gingham, with a black scarf thrown round my shoulders, and a white bonnet trimmed with ribbed silk ribbon of the same shade, mixed with a little bit of real lace, which had belonged to my dear mother, in which nestled a cluster of pale pink roses with brown-tinted leaves. To-day, Sir Gaspard seemed thoroughly at his ease, not that I intend to convey the impression that he could be otherwise; but, of course, it is so much easier to converse when there are no auditors, and I believe that Mrs Grabber-Pounce was sufficient in herself to make any one restrained. Even when asleep, she woke up when least expected, and she asked so many questions that she spoiled any sociable conversation. Moreover, if a person is confiding things concerning himself and his doings—private affairs in fact, he does not particularly care to have another listener.

And Sir Gaspard did confide in me; he told me how cruelly and harshly he had been brought up; how he had never known a good mother's care; his father too, was killed by jumping from a train, whilst it was in motion, when Sir Gaspard was only nine years old. His guardians behaved atrociously, abominably, to him. They
were distant relations, and longed for his death, like ghouls; for then, as he was an only child, the estate and money would go to them. They sent him to a horrid cheap school where he was starved and worked till his health was almost permanently injured, only that his constitution was so splendid that he was able to fight through the hardships, and emerge from them unscathed. Even his holidays were spent at the wretched scholastic institution. Just when his wicked connections sent for him to return, as they meant to ship him off as a midshipman on a vessel that was shortly to sail to the Arctic regions, an old friend of his mother's met him by accident in the stage-coach in which he was travelling, and having noticed the name on the luggage, at once knew it was her son, from the title which he bore.

This old friend, a certain Mr Forester, had only lately returned from China, where he had been for many years. He questioned Sir Gaspard, narrowly, and soon discovered that he was being foully wronged. He visited the guardians and so intimidated them, that they at length gave up the youthful baronet into his keeping; had they not done so, Mr Forester would have shown them up before all the world, and they would have been ruined as to character, for Mr Forester was an influential and respected man.

Once out of the clutches of those evil persons, Sir Gaspard's life ran smoothly enough—in much the same pleasant grooves as those of other lads and young men of his class. He assured me that if he had the least good in him, he owed it to Mr Forester's bright example and excellent advice.

Sir Gaspard never wearied of hearing about my life; he begged me to tell him everything; he was intensely sympathetic. He spoke of Mrs Grabber-Pounce, and although, of course, I perceived that he had no high
opinion of her, still he would not condescend to ridicule or make sport of her in the way Mr Clapp had done.

‘One requires patience with old ladies, I fancy,’ he remarked, as he neared Russell Square; ‘and I do hope that Mrs Grabber-Pounce treats you with consideration and kindness, for I know she is very hard; it pains me to think of you with her, after living in your happy home at Croft Manor.’

I felt that Sir Gaspard was a true friend and a gentleman to the core. I could not hide all my thoughts from him; it did not seem wrong to confide in him just a little with regard to my mistress.

‘Yes, you are right; she is hard, and one does want a big slice of patience,’ I replied.

‘Poor little girl,’ he said musingly, then added with earnestness, ‘Forgive me, Miss Pyecroft, the words escaped my lips in spite of myself.’

‘Of course,’ I responded. ‘What reason have I for feeling offended? You are so kind!’ We were at the door; before us were the imposing dragon knockers.

‘Good-bye, then—for to-day,’ he said. ‘I shall hope to call on Mrs Grabber-Pounce at five o’clock to-morrow, and shall look forward to the pleasure of seeing you.’ He lifted his hat and taking my hand, said ‘Good-bye’ once more, as his frank grey eyes gazed for a second straight into mine.

‘Oh, Grannie, you are very kind, you have really told us more than we expected.’ That’s what you say, you cheeky young monkeys, is it? Well, indeed, I think I have told you too much!

‘And what happened next, Grannie?’

You impatient things, you won’t allow a poor old lady breathing space; this is what happened: Sir Gaspard came to tea according to his promise, and he came again and again; he also dined once more. ‘Did he speak to me much?’ Yes, he certainly did, as much as he was
able. At last one day, Mrs Grabber-Pounce, who was singularly blind, it seemed, remarked to me, 'I can't imagine why my cousin, Sir Gaspard Baxabert, is continually calling 'ere; 'e never used to do so, and 'e seldom cared to dine except now and again.' I was very wily; I only said, 'Oh, indeed, it does seem rather odd.'
CHAPTER XX

One afternoon, for a wonder, Mrs Grabber-Pounce was indisposed, and declared her intention of remaining in her room 'to rest.' I am only surprised that she enjoyed such good health, for she tried every patent medicine that came out, and I am sure was a golden goose to the makers and vendors. She was for ever endeavouring to foist So-and-so's pills or somebody else's 'nerve tonic,' or anti-splenetic mixture upon me, but I made a brave stand and would have none of them.

Thank heaven there was nothing amiss with me, although she was enough to worry a strong, healthy young woman into a rapid decline.

When I asked her, 'Why she took so much physic, seeing that she always insisted she was so much more vigorous than I,' she said, 'she did so to keep away the doctors, and that good medicines built up and rejuvenated the constitution.' I did not agree with her, but never mind—I was speaking of the particular afternoon on which she felt ill. Before leaving the drawing-room she desired me not to give the parrots their usual music lesson, as the noise might disturb her; I therefore took an embroidery-frame and worked busily on a cushion which she wished me to make for her. I employed myself industriously in this manner for about an hour, whilst my thoughts, were I fear, differently employed, frequently wandering in the direction of my
good friend, Sir Gaspard, when, to my delight and wonder, he was ushered in by the butler.

‘I felt sure you would see me,’ he said, as he advanced towards me.

I rose to meet him, and most probably I looked as pleased as I felt.

‘Busy little lady—always busy! let me admire the pretty work that those deft fingers have accomplished!’ and he carefully examined the pattern upon which I had been engaged.

‘How intricate!’ he exclaimed. ‘But don’t spoil your eyes over it; no, won’t you leave it now, please?’ as I took up my needle to begin once more.

‘Yes, if it makes you happier,’ I replied laughingly.

‘What bliss to find you alone, Miss Pyecroft.’

I glanced at him coyly, and I believe that I blushed. And now, it is no good; I neither can nor will repeat word for word what followed. Suffice it to say that Sir Gaspard told me very simply that he loved me dearly, that he had loved me from the first, and that he wanted me for his wife.

I hardly know what I replied; I was trembling like an aspen leaf, and I shed a few tears of happiness, you may be sure. Then he put his arms tenderly around me, and seeing that I did not repulse him he kissed my hair and eyes; and by-and-by he managed to coax me into telling him that I loved him too: he said he couldn’t rest till he had heard the words from my lips, although, of course, I am certain that he knew well enough that I cared, before I uttered them. Sir Gaspard said he wished the marriage to be soon, as he couldn’t bear to leave me a moment longer than was absolutely necessary with Mrs Grabber-Pounce. We sat close to each other and talked of our future plans, and of our present felicity, feeling all the time in Paradise, and quite heedless of the passing
hours. Twilight came, and Sir Gaspard still lingered at my side.

'Well, I never did, the brazen-faced minx!' It was the voice of Mrs Grabber-Pounce. We had not heard her enter the room, and she stood facing us; and regarding me with the mien of a fury.

The griffen!' said Sir Gaspard under his breath.

Then he took my hand, and holding it firmly in his own, whilst whispering, 'Never mind, little one,' in my ear, he rose, drawing me gently up from my seat also, and leading me to my mistress, we both confronted her.

She turned to Sir Gaspard, glaring at him like an infuriated piteful witch, and said, menacingly, 'My 'ouse 'as always been respectable. I will tolerate no disreputable be'aviour, therefore, I must beg you, Sir Gaspard, not to carry on in this way 'ere. I wouldn't 'ave believed it of you—as for that shameless 'ussy, she leaves to­morrow without fail.'

As she finished this sentence, she threw a withering glance in my direction, and caught back her gown, as if she feared defilement from my touch.

Sir Gaspard's eyes flashed dangerously.

'Mrs Grabber-Pounce,' he began, and in his voice lay an intonation that I had never yet heard in it. The softness had fled, or was almost entirely veiled, for it broke through occasionally during his discourse, whilst above it swelled the awe-inspiring, sonorous harmony of righteous indignation, of just wrath, in which no discordant note is ever audible. 'Mrs Grabber-Pounce, you are labouring under a mistake, for which reason alone am I able to forget what else would rankle in my memory and blast our friendship. Forgiveness is one thing, but remembrance another, and it is often beyond human power to blot and wipe out the past—of which fact, I imagine, you must, at your time of life, be aware.'

He paused for a moment. The old lady had grown a
shade paler or yellower, and leaning forward on the jewelled-handled crutch-stick, which she usually carried, stared at him. Written on her face, were mingled defiance and alarm, wrestling together, and it seemed uncertain which would obtain the mastery in the mad conflict in which her soul was shaken, like a fortress to its foundations.

'Sir Gaspard, you—' she re-commenced, hesitatingly.

'I pray you cease,' he interrupted; 'it is far better to be silent. Miss Pyecroft has done me the honour of accepting my hand.'

'What! ' broke in Mrs Grabber-Pounce, looking as if she were going to have a fit. 'You are joking—what do I'ear? I am becoming a little deaf—repeat it, pray!' She screamed forth the words, and held up her skinny, beringed left hand to her ear, in order that she might hear more distinctly.

'I mean just what I say,' continued Sir Gaspard, clearly and tranquilly. 'Miss Victoria Pyecroft will shortly become Lady Baxabert, and I am greatly honoured by her consent, and more radiantly happy than I can tell. Won't you congratulate me, Mrs Grabber-Pounce?' and he smiled.

The old dame sank into a chair as if completely overcome, and had recourse to her bottle of smelling-salts. She had received a cruel shock; the unforeseen had occurred and put her out in her reckoning. The earth had diverged from its correct circular course, and was wildly careering in topsy-turvydom. She sniffed at the invigorating tonical phial, with her chin embedded in the bosom of her dress, with downcast eyes and drooping mouth. We remained quietly and calmly expectant; my heart beat exultingly. Presently she moved; her false teeth clicked, her lips parted convulsively, then closed again. For the second time they twitched and opened: 'Well a-day!' she muttered, 'well a-day. So I am to
wish you joy, Sir Gaspard—my dear second cousin, twice removed. I am not dreaming? No?' and she gazed about her as if half scared; then her voice grew stronger. 'It is not a nightmare I gather. I must wish you joy? Certainly, I do so,' these words were uttered very slowly. 'Going to be married—just fancy—and to Miss Pyecroft. Well, now, when am I lose 'er, for you must recollect that I cannot be alone, and I must 'ave time to suit myself afresh. Very odd—queer; uncommon queer, I call it. One companion dies; the other marries; what will the rest do I am asking? Deary me, what the world 'as come to—let me see, when do you wish to leave, Miss Pyecroft, if you please?'

The if you please was drawled out in a very sarcastic way. Perhaps Sir Gaspard did not notice the inflection; men fortunately do not always observe these trivial feminine amenities, whether of speech or manner.

We looked at each other. 'Leave next week; marry me next week; why not?' Sir Gaspard added the last word decisively, seeing how I started at the sudden idea; for I almost gasped. Could I possibly entertain the notion of such a proceeding?

'Why not, dear?' he whispered gently; 'be guided by me—do as I ask.'

I hesitated for a moment, weighing the matter in my mind, then I resolved to grant his request, for if I continued to remain in Russell Square, Mrs Grabber-Pounce would in all probability make my life as miserable as she dared, and they couldn't afford to keep me at home, where they lived from hand to mouth.

'Let it be as you think best,' I whispered to my lover in return.

'Miss Pyecroft will leave here to-day week, Mrs Grabber-Pounce,' said Sir Gaspard.

'So soon—so soon, ah, well, so much the better. Then she pulled herself up. 'I intended to say,' she pursued,
'that as I go out of town on the 1st of August I shall just 'ave time to suit myself; in fact, I know of a decayed gentlewoman 'oo (who) will be enchanted to 'ave the place—at any rate for the 'oliday months.'

‘Then I will wish you a very good evening;’ and Sir Gaspard took her hand and bowed politely.

He bade me adieu in the back drawing-room, far from the prying eyes of the grim old dragon; but the farewell was only till the next morning when he meant to fetch me for a stroll.

After he had gone, Mrs Grabber-Pounce said that she had not given me credit for so much worldly wisdom. She also informed me that I was gifted with a calculating mind and a designing disposition.

This was very pleasing. When I assured her that the thought of laying myself out to captivate Sir Gaspard had not entered my head, also that I should not marry him if I did not care for him (for she kept throwing his position in my face, till it made me feel sick), she replied, ‘I might tell that to the parrots, they might believe me, but she did not.’ She added, ‘that I was eaten up with ambition, and wanted to ride in a chariot with a coachman in a wig, and a powdered footman standing up behind.’

However, I could afford to laugh. She might even have been still more insulting, and I would not have minded. I felt that I could well hold out for a few days. The time would pass quickly, and then I should be rid of her vixenish company for ever!

Sir Gaspard appeared at ten o’clock on the following morning, and I was spruce, neat and trim, best boots, new gloves, smart bonnet, all for his benefit and edification; neither do I think that all these beauties of my toilet were lost upon him.

I am speaking sarcastically, because my things (with the exception of those smart pointed toed boots) were so poor, so valueless; just clean, and that was all! I
cudgelled my brains to know how I could purchase some kind of trousseau. There was certainly not much time in which to buy gowns or clothes of any description, but a wedding dress I must have and a small stock of garments. It was so painful to think of going to a husband like an utter pauper, and it made me grow red with shame when I thought about it. How kind, how considerate was Sir Gaspard; he had foreseen this difficulty, he longed to make the path smooth, to surround me with tender care; he had divined my secret.

He told me in such a refined and delicate manner, that he thought I must be in need of a little pocket money, for any trifles I might fancy, and he wanted to give me a cheque for £250. Just as if I would have accepted it though! I couldn’t do that; I was too proud. I thanked him, and assured him I wanted nothing, oh dear, no.

‘But had he offended me?’ he asked.

‘No, he couldn’t possibly offend me,’ I replied.

Still the difficulty remained, and that night when I went to bed, I wept.

Of course, I had written to tell papa about my engagement, and to ask for his paternal consent and blessing. I soon received an affectionate answer.

‘He was more than pleased. He remembered Sir Gaspard perfectly, years ago, when dear mamma was alive, and my future husband was very young; he had heard of him since, and nothing but good.’ He went on to say, ‘that I was a very lucky girl.’ And I must have some money for a trousseau, even if it were only a plain one. He enclosed a note for £20 which my stepmother insisted that I should accept, both as a wedding gift from herself and as a souvenir; she had spared me this sum out of her savings.

I was deeply touched, and could not ungraciously refuse this generous help, which would save me from
being a miserable poverty-stricken bride. I penned a letter to my father and said that Sir Gaspard insisted on his coming up to his rooms the day before the wedding, so as to be able to give me away. Indeed Sir Gaspard asked me to deliver this message whenever I wrote home, after having received papa’s consent (which he made sure would be given). I was not oblivious of the good Mrs Wilkins in my great happiness; we corresponded occasionally, and I knew that she would now rejoice with me; and in return for my few lines, she sent me her hearty good wishes, besides a sweet little work-box with silver fittings. Indeed, putting Mrs Grabber-Pounce aside, everything was rose-tinted and joyous. It was arranged that on my wedding morn, papa should fetch me from Russell Square, and drive with me in a hackney coach to the Church of Saint Pancras, where Gaspard and I were to be made man and wife.
CHAPTER XXI

The time flew by as if on azure wings, and at length my wedding morning dawned. All seemed smiling; even Mrs Grabber-Pounce smiled in a manner which was not ill-natured. She was at last resigned to my good fortune, and her taunts had ceased on the previous evening, so you perceive that for the last week my lot in Russell Square had not been entirely flower strewn. To my astonishment the old lady announced her intention of being present at the ceremony, and she offered me her third best green parrot for a present, saying she would keep it for me till I went down to Bax Priory. I did not refuse the gift, because I did not wish her to think me nasty, for decidedly I bore her no malice; besides I loved all creatures and determined to make a pet of the bird, although I promised myself that he should not be the only of the lower species, as I fully intended to have a King Charles spaniel, if not two; as for birds in cages I never should have bought them, for I couldn’t bear to think that they were selfishly deprived of their freedom; I always fed the wild birds in the winter and so tamed them.

But to return to my marriage; just imagine how quiet it was! A few of the servants from Russell Square were present, and I do believe poor Mr Clapp was hidden away behind a pillar; then there was Mrs Grabber-Pounce who hobbled into the front pew, dressed in
many colours. A Mr Darlingworth was best man, and just a sprinkling of persons who had got wind of the affair, and who were acquainted with Sir Gaspard, were dotted about, besides three or four of his most intimate friends.

My dress was of the shade known as lavender, my bonnet to correspond; wedding breakfast there was none; who was there to give it? Gaspard, of course, gave me a lovely fragrant bouquet though! We took leave of papa and of those who came forward to speed us on our way (Gaspard introduced some new people to me) at the church door, and were driven very quickly, considering the rate at which folks travelled then, in a post chaise to Dover and embarking for Calais, from there went on to Paris.

I had never been abroad before, so you can fancy how charmed I was by all I saw. We journeyed onwards to the Italian lakes and only returned to England and to Bax Priory late in the autumn.

What do you think Sir Gaspard did, without my knowledge, the day before our wedding? He sent £500 to my stepmother anonymously. I only knew of it much later; and he insisted on giving her and papa a liberal yearly allowance, so that they could live comfortably for the future at Croft Manor, and, of course, they often visited us. And then you know how when Mrs Grabber-Pounce died (her death was caused by an apoplectic fit brought on by eating a hearty meal of lobster), that all her money passed into Sir Gaspard’s hands, failing any nearer relative, for my husband was a distant cousin of the late Mr Thomas Pounce, who was Lord Mayor of London. I need not repeat the old story about how Sir Gaspard put Croft Manor into thorough repair after papa’s death, for failing heirs male, it then became mine. All this is stale matter which is so uninteresting.
I told you that we went down to Bax Priory in the autumn on our return from the honeymoon, and decided to reside there altogether. Sir Gaspard had lost his seat in Parliament through a change in the Government, and he did not wish to stand again at the next election. He told me privately that he was disgusted with the general bribery and corruption, of which as a member of the house he had seen so much. He said that the representatives of the nation were for the most part a narrow-minded self-seeking crew, who cared for naught but their own aggrandisement; he thought there was little to choose between the whigs and tories. Yet he was a whig! And then all was so disappointing; several bills that he had ardently desired to see passed had been rejected with scorn, whilst enemies in his own party had arisen—persons whose only aim was to get on and force themselves into power. They fought only for themselves and deliberately refused to aid him in his philanthropical schemes, so that although formerly he had managed to do some good, lately it had been a hopeless task. He meant, therefore, to confine himself for the present to writing articles to the various newspapers in order to ventilate his ideas and stir up public feeling. He had also just finished writing a book, and sent it to a publisher just before our marriage; if he perceived any beneficial results to accrue from its circulation, he should immediately commence another.

Of course Sir Gaspard had wide interests at Bax; all his tenantry and various animals. He objected to hunting on principle, but he rode splendidly and could manage any horse. He would preserve no tame barn-door pheasants for shooting, although occasionally when he fancied a little game for dinner, or desired to send some to a friend, he would walk out with his gun, accompanied by the keeper and a favourite dog which lived in the house. Sir Gaspard was a straight and true shot;
winged birds and mutilated hares were unknown on our estate, and I regret to say that they were and are met with on the land of many large proprietors, owing to the wanton carelessness of sportsmen and the brutal callousness both of masters and keepers, who do not insist upon the poor creatures being discovered and put out of their misery, even if much time and trouble have to be expended in the search.

I date my happiness from my marriage; previous to it I had known much sadness. All my childhood and early girlhood were more or less sorrowful, but I had not reached my twenty-first birthday when I married, so I had much to thank God for, that my troubles ceased so soon. The past pain seemed so insignificant in comparison to the peaceful joy of the fair present. Sir Gaspard proved the most devoted husband that has ever been known. He adored me, and to say that I loved him dearly too, doesn't half express the feeling. You see he was and is so honourable and so unselfish!

'Ah, Grannie, he says the same of you, we know.'

Nonsense, silly little things! Our life ran pleasantly along like a purling rippling stream, evenly, and barely ruffled by a passing cloud. Nothing of particular interest occurred for some time, to make a mark upon which to turn back often, and gaze with joy or regret. Nothing eventful to cause a slight break, a gulf to be bridged over, dividing what was before from what was after. All was a smooth mossy plain, upon which the sun neither shone too fiercely with parching rays, nor hid his cheerful beaming face. He just warmed us and glowed upon us out of an azure sky bereft of concealing vapours or of looming darkness. So we smiled at one another and lived for one another, and for the drooping and afflicted in the sad alleys of the World's Garden where no flowerets grow, and where even the poor suffering beasts look up with pleading eyes for
help. So we gazed around, unforgetful of the misery, and rendering what little aid we could. Would that it had been possible for us to do more!'

'You want to hear about the vision?' So you shall, dearies. I should be sorry to mention the subject to strangers, or unsympathetic persons; but you sweet grand-children are my own kith and kin. Listen attentively then:

I had been married about six months, and one dark night in a cold, bleak, country February, I awoke suddenly from my first sleep with a start. Wonderingly I gazed before me, for the whole room was brilliantly lighted, flooded as it were in a soft silvery radiance, in which were suspended still brighter phosphorescent starry shapes. Whence did this shine come? not from the moon, for without all was black and sombre; an ebon pall o'er trees and sky. Was I dreaming, or had I been transported to some distant sphere? Was I dead? I sat up and looked around. No; I was in my own room; by my side was Sir Gaspard, peacefully slumbering, and I could hear his soft regular breathing. And just then there burst upon my ear the first strains of a heavenly melody, which swelled and grew until the air was full of harmony. I cannot describe the music, it was unearthly; it seemed to stream into my soul and waft me upwards—amid holy aspirations, higher and higher yet, away from the misty nebulous atmosphere of an illusive world, into a beyond leading nearer and nearer the divine, where all is reality. So I hearkened, entranced, gazing meanwhile into the resplendent shadowless glory, wherein I presently beheld a pure white speck, which grew, resolving itself by degrees into a figure in which, oh, what emotions the thought now brings me, I recognised my own dear mother—beautiful beyond the conception of the most poetic imagination. The former charms of person and expression paled in com-
SIR GASPARD'S AFFINITY

parison to this celestial loveliness; she was self-luminous; shimmering; diamond-crowned. Her robes were as glistening alabaster; around her waist was a dazzling, flashing girdle of stones, which gleamed and scintillated forth flamingly into the surrounding whiteness. Her hair waved luxuriously about her shoulders, and her face was the face of an angel, and bore the impress of eternal youth. She smiled, and floating towards me, slowly disappeared, growing fainter and fainter in outline till she was lost to my view.

And then I remembered Gaspard. Oh, why had I not awakened him in time? The room was still bathed in an argent brightness; the spiritual melody still lingered lovingly as if regretful of leaving me. My husband must see and hear what remained. I touched his arm and he awoke, just in time; for one brief moment he heard and saw—and then the music ceased, and night once more wrapped us in its shroud.

'My beloved,' he whispered; 'surely we have had a glimpse of Heaven, and the angels' songs have reached us!' Ah, there is grandpapa; now he shall speak for himself.

'Gaspard, do you remember the night on which you beheld the radiance, and listened to the music of the spheres—a foretaste of Heaven as you called it?'

'Sweetheart mine; can I ever forget?'

You hear grandpapa's reply; well, my darlings, neither can I forget. Grandpapa and I are nearing the end of our long journey, and as we stand on the verge of the gulf, which divides this life from the next, we gaze across till we seem to behold in spirit, the shores of that mighty Eternity, through the countless ages of which, we shall, with hand firmly clasped in hand, together continue our upward progress, till perchance we may finally attain to the grand heights of that glorious realm of transcendent light, where dwells the Great Heart of Love, who has in
His infinite goodness, dowered each one of his children, the righteous and the erring, the rich, beggar, and outcast alike, with the blessed gift of immortality. The evil pertaining to matter shall be cleared away from every divine spirit at last; the true sonship shall be manifested when the hidden angel appears, and asserts his divine birth-right.
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