## CHAPTER XV.

UP in noisy, smoky Greatmills, Owen Delmar was working very hard, leaving absolutely no stone unturned to secure a voter. The Greatmills native was inclined to take his politics somewhat stormily, and to have very decided opinions, sometimes requiring to be emphasised by brick-bats, on all points. In the olden days he might have been bought by the highest bidder, but even then he would have been a hard fish to catch. But Greatmills was reported to be a Conservative place, or at least to be opposed to the Radicals on one of the burning questions of the day, and Sydney Warren, Owen's opponent, was supposed to have much influence in the place.

Therefore Owen's fight was a very up-hill combat, and he had need of all his strength, his energy, and his talents. It was hard work, but he spared himself no labour. Sometimes, too, when not addressing his own constituents, he was speaking for some other candidate on a Liberal platform, for his eloquence was much sought after.

But he was very far from forgetting East Elmshire amid all his interests and occupations in the north. There was one person in East Elmshire he could not have forgotten

if he would. Perhaps had he been seeing her frequently, and as frequently sparring with her, Gertrude Digby would not have occupied quite such a prominent position in his thoughts as she did now she was so far away. Over and over again he wondered whether she hated him as much as she made out, and told himself, he who had never failed in anything, that surely he could make her love him if he tried. That he was very much in love with her he was fully aware by this time, though he had never shaken hands, and hardly exchanged a civil word with her. The greater the obstacles to be overcome, the more ardently did Owen Delmar desire to surmount them. In this lay the essence of his love for Miss Digby.

Madeline kept him well supplied with Elmshire news. From her letters he gleaned with delight that she and Gertrude were becoming rather friends, and that towards one Delmar at any rate Miss Digby had dropped her hostility. This was something. Owen began to be seized with a strange impatience to put his fate to the test, mad though the idea seemed under the circumstances. But he reflected with regret that he must wait till after his election. Then he thought rather regretfully that he would either be an M.P., and not quite standing on his own native merits, or a rejected candidate, in which case— But it was characteristic of Owen to turn away resolutely from this alternative.

Not long before the elections began, he unexpectedly discovered he might allow himself two or three days' holiday. It was not before he needed it, for the work he had been doing would have tried a man of stronger physique than he possessed. He started off at once for Crane Court.

One of the first meets of the East Elmshire hounds

took place at Eastanley Castle, but in spite of many attractions, there was not a very large gathering assembled on the wide gravel sweep in front of the house. The population in that part of the county was extremely scanty; besides, at that period of the year, many people were thinking more of pheasants than foxes.

Gertrude Digby was there with her father, looking her very best in her neat hat and tight-fitting habit, for their dark hue and severe cut displayed her bright hair, and shell-like colouring, and trim figure to the utmost advantage. She had ridden from childhood, so she was perfectly at home on horseback, and a graceful and fearless rider.

One of the first people she spoke to was Ted Calverley, who was in pink, and mounted on the young thoroughbred, who was somewhat calmed down since the summer. He had often been taken out cub-hunting.

'You out to-day!' exclaimed Miss Digby. 'You ought to be far too busy canvassing, for such frivolities.'

'A fellow can't work always,' replied the Honourable Ted, with mild but righteous indignation. 'My life is a perfect slavery. I am hauled about to meetings all over the place. Last night I was at a smoking one, and I held forth till my throat was sore, to clouds of tobacco smoke. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. I woke with a head on this morning that was worthy of a better cause.'

'I declare I won't work for you any more. You are too tiresome!'

'Don't give up, Miss Gertie. You often tell me you are not working for me, but the Cause, with a big C.

Heaven alone knows how you expect to benefit it by getting me into Parliament.'

'Because you will keep a Rad. out,' retorted Gertie. Look! there's a good horse, and well ridden too! Oh!'

The last ejaculation was in a tone of discomfiture, for Miss Digby discovered the rider of the beautiful chestnut she had been admiring was none other than Mr Owen Delmar. But at the same time she was obliged to admit to herself that not only was the chestnut a magnificent animal, but that his master seemed to know quite well how to manage him, which, as he evidently possessed a temper of his own, was no child's play. Splendidly mounted, and very well turned out, Owen did not look so insignificant as usual on horseback.

'There's nothing like money!' she muttered spitefully, choosing to ignore the fact that money could not possibly make a man a good rider, or give him either a firm seat, hands, or nerve.

It was not very long before she found the chestnut by her side. The very juxtaposition of such an animal made her painfully aware of the inferiority of her own mount, whose best days were past. She felt absurdly vexed, too, that Owen should prove such a good horseman. The fact was, she wanted to hate and despise him, and it was irritating that she could not. But deep down in her heart she knew, now that she saw him again, after a period during which she had by no means forgotten him, that it was neither dislike nor contempt she felt for him. And with the dawn of this discovery came an unreasoning anger, and the hatred which could not vent itself on him was turned against herself.

'I thought you were in the north,' she said, as she

bowed to him, and her tone was as if she had said 'I hoped' instead of 'I thought.'

'So I was until yesterday, and I return again to-morrow night,' he replied.

'You see, Miss Digby, other people take a holiday too, now and then,' remarked Calverley, who was still close at hand.

'Yes, but other people work too, occasionally,' said Gertrude severely, with a quick glance at Owen Delmar's face, which certainly bore more traces of labour and fatigue than that of the Honourable Ted.

'How are you getting on?' inquired Owen of him.

'Pretty average, but I don't know much about it,' Ted replied carelessly. 'It's a beastly fag, isn't it? Meetings here and meetings there—I get so sick of them. I believe I hold forth at your place to-night.'

'Yes, I saw a poster announcing a meeting in the Craneham schoolroom. I think I shall come down and hear you.'

'For Heaven's sake, don't, Delmar! I should be frightened to death if I knew a fellow like you were listening. I don't much mind the rustics. They don't detect you if you do talk nonsense.'

'Don't they, here? They do fast enough up north, and they ask no end of questions too.'

'That's what I live in abject terror of,—that some fellow should ask me riddles. I shouldn't have a notion what to say.'

'Well, I think I will come and hear you to-night, and propound some questions,' said Owen, laughing. 'Have you been canvassing much, Miss Digby, for Mr Calverley?'

'It's not for him, but the Cause,' she replied. 'But I've done more for him than he has ever done for himself.'

'I wish I had you to canvass for me.'

'But I shouldn't do it for you, Mr Delmar.'

'Not if I were a Conservative?'

'I can't imagine you anything so praiseworthy!' she retorted, but further conversation was stopped, for at this instant a holloa, speedily followed by the musical note of the hounds, warned them that the business of the day was about to begin.

Gertrude galloped off, out of the wood, down a lane, over a gap, and across a couple of fields. There was a good scent, and the hounds were running beautifully. She was dimly aware that the chestnut, despite a series of kicks and bounds, which showed he did not appreciate being in the rear, was being kept close behind her. The field was beginning to get scattered, but Miss Digby, whose blood was up, rode straight after the hounds. A great bank, with a ditch on either side, forming what is known in the hunting-field as a double, rose before her. A straggling fence ran along the top, broken down in one place, but in one place only, so there alone was it possible to surmount the fence.

Gertrude took her horse at the gap, but he had arrived at a time of life when he never jumped big fences unless he could help it, and he deliberately refused. She turned him round, and took him at it again, well aware that the chestnut was only being kept still with difficulty, and that his rider was probably anathematising her in his heart. Her horse, apparently convinced that impossibilities were being demanded of him, refused again.

'Shall I give you a lead, Miss Digby?' asked Owen quietly.

It was a bitter moment, but she knew there was no

help for it, so, colouring with vexation, she bowed assent. In a moment the chestnut had disappeared over the fence, and Gertrude's horse, seeing the thing was to be done, after all, took heart of grace, and followed suit. Owen just paused to see her alight in safety, and then galloped off after the hounds. Gertrude did not follow him. She had seen enough to know he would give her a better lead than anyone out that day, but she felt she would sooner lose the run than accept one from him.

This was precisely what she did. She went off in another direction, which proved to be a wrong one, and she got mixed up with some people who always managed to be in a bad place, so she kept on getting further and further behind, for there was a burning scent, and no check long enough to enable a laggard to catch up. Finally, she caught the faint echo of a far-off who-whoop, and a few minutes later arrived to find the majority of the field assembled, the pack baying round the huntsman, cigars being lighted, and sandwiches produced. Owen Delmar stood by the side of his beautiful chestnut, who was reduced to calmness at last. She was irritated, but not surprised, to hear from Ted Calverley, who had been among the first dozen, that the soap-boiler's son and the huntsman himself had been the only two in at the death.

'He is so splendidly mounted,' she said.

'Yes, but he rode awfully well too!' replied Ted, more disposed to be magnanimous.

Owen was leading the chestnut round the outskirts of the circle of horsemen and horsewomen who surrounded the pack and poor Reynard's corpse, with evident intention of speaking to Gertrude. Just as he came up, Mr

Digby called out,—'Come along, Gertie. We must be going home soon if we mean to hunt again this week.'

'I am ready!' she replied, and she rode away by her father's side, merely vouchsafing a cold bow to Owen Delmar. He stayed out himself till the end of the day—it was the first time he had hunted that season, and was likely to be the last for the present, and he was anxious to make the most of it. The other members of his family went down to the village school that evening to hear Ted Calverley, but he did not, much to that young gentleman's relief.

Ted returned to supper at Crane Court, and devoted himself assiduously to Madeline. He had not *quite* made up his mind to marry yet. Things had not quite come to that. But he had made up his mind that, if he ever did marry, his wife should be none other than Madeline Delmar. He was beginning to think himself very much in love with her.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THE following day was damp and raw. It was not precisely wet, but the air was full of a chilly moisture, that occasionally amounted to a drizzle. It was not a tempting day to go out of doors, but Gertie Digby had determined to go off on a canvassing expedition to two rather distant cottages that afternoon, and she was not one who minded weather. She put on a short, rough petticoat, strong boots, a thick coat, and a plain felt hat, and started off soon after lunch for her walk. It was excessively muddy, but East Elmshire natives were inured to that, and Gertrude trudged along sturdily through the mud and damp.

She had accomplished her mission—that is to say, she had done her best, by cajolery and argument, to induce two profoundly ignorant voters to put their cross opposite the name of Ted Calverley, and she was turning homewards, when she was startled to meet Owen Delmar splashing along the muddy cart-track by which she had come. It was always a little surprising to meet anyone in that lonely country, but Gertrude would not have started at the appearance of anyone else as she did when she saw Owen.

You may pass an acquaintance in Bond Street, or the King's Road, with a bow, but if you meet a person with whom you are ever so slightly acquainted in a lonely country lane, you can hardly avoid stopping to exchange a few words with them. Therefore Gertrude could not pass Owen Delmar with the distant salutation she would like to have bestowed on him.

'You are brave to venture out on such a day,' he said.

She had almost held out her hand, but he made absolutely no movement in response.

'I don't mind the wet,' she replied. By this time the Scotch mist was resolving itself into a steady drizzle. 'Besides, I had to come out this afternoon to look after two voters I had not yet tackled.'

'I hope you have been successful, Miss Digby?'

Gertrude laughed as she answered,—

'One could not read at all, but had no views in particular. So I carefully explained to him how he was to hold his voting paper, so that the large print came on the left side and the small print at the bottom, and I impressed upon him that he was to put his cross opposite the first name. I trust he won't forget. My other voter was inscrutable, and said he would tell no one which way he would vote; which meant he would vote wrong, but did not wish to say so.'

'It certainly won't be your fault if the Honourable Ted does not get in.'

'No; as I before said, it will be all his own. Not quite though, for there are so many wretched Radicals about these parts.'

'I hope you don't call all Radicals wretched?'

'Most of them are, I find.'

She made a movement as if to go on, and he turned and walked by her side.

It was certainly not a cheerful afternoon. The grey light was already fading, and the bare brown landscape around was veiled by a sheet of fine rain. The trails of brambles and the leafless twigs in the hedges were beaded with moisture, and there was no living thing to be seen but a disconsolate blackbird or two. Delmar and Gertrude were splashing through deep mud and many puddles, but they did not attempt to pick their way, for the lane was all equally bad.

It was not an inspiring afternoon for lovemaking, but unpropitious as were all the circumstances, Owen was seized with a wild determination to put his fate to the test.

'Miss Digby,' he said, after a moment's silence, looking her straight in the face, 'I am going to ask you a straightforward question, and I want you to give me a straightforward answer. Do you really hate me very much?'

A hot colour mounted to Gertrude's face, for suddenly she felt, with a conviction which allowed no room for doubt, what was coming, and she knew there was no escaping it. It need hardly be said that, in spite of Owen's entreaty, she did not reply straightforwardly.

'What a very extraordinary question, Mr Delmar,' she said. 'Perhaps I do not hate you, merely because I do not think it worth while.'

He winced a little. Her contempt was harder to bear than her hatred, but he had an idea it was feigned.

'Is it such an extraordinary question?' he said. 'Yet I should like to have a more honest answer than you have

given me, because— Listen, Miss Digby!' He stopped short in the lane, and she, compelled by some power stronger than herself, stopped too, and they stood facing each other. 'It is no use beating about the bush. I will tell you what I have to say straight out. I love you!'

'You—love me!' she ejaculated, but there was just a faint emphasis as of contemptuous surprise in her voice that stung him afresh.

'Yes, even I, Miss Digby, *I* dare to love you!' he answered hotly. 'You can't prevent that, you know. I don't quite know when I first began to, but I am perfectly certain I love you now, in spite of all our differences and quarrels. I love you—do you understand that?' His voice took a softer tone, and there was a light in his eyes Gertrude had never seen there before. 'Will you be my wife, Gertrude?'

She turned away her head, so that he could not see her face. If he could but have known the mad tumult that was going on inside her heart! For she felt she loved him only too well, and yet—it was utterly impossible she could marry him; she, who had never spoken one civil word to him; she, who had openly declared her dislike of him and his. And his! yes, that was another reason why it was impossible. How could she, a Digby, marry a Delmar, the son of a self-made man,—of a mother whose aspirates were uncertain? But it would have been so much easier to say no, had she hated him half as much as she pretended to.

'You must be mad,' she said calmly, with the self-control nearly every woman knows how to exercise—'you must be mad, even to think of such a thing.'

'Please give me a plainer answer than that!'

'You require things put so very plainly, Mr Delmar. No, I will never marry you—*never!* Are you content now?'

'Why do you refuse me? Is it because I am a Delmar, and you despise me for my birth? or a Radical, and you hate me for my principles?'

'What is the good of asking? You cannot change the one, and you would not change the other, I presume. You were perfectly mad to ask me such a question, when you knew I hated you; and you might have known I could not possibly marry you. I only hope we may not meet again for some time.' And with a cold bow she moved away.

'Good-evening!' answered Owen, just lifting his hat. Then he added to himself, as he watched her vanishing in the wet twilight. 'But I'll make you love me yet, Gertrude. We have not *yet* done with each other. I am not so easily foiled.'

His face was very pale, but his eyes blazed, and he set his teeth and clenched his hands unconsciously, as he turned away and began walking rapidly homewards. At the moment he felt more anger than pain; but before he reached Crane Court his anger had had time to cool, and he realised that he had been refused,—refused with scorn, by the girl he loved; a blow to any man, but a bitter one to a man of his pride. It was not an encouraging augury either for the success of that other conflict at Greatmills.

Would he have felt comforted could he have seen Gertrude leaning against a wayside gate, in all the grey damp of that autumn evening, sobbing as if her heart was breaking? There had been no alternative in her mind—she could not possibly have done otherwise than

refuse Owen Delmar, but none the less she knew she loved him, though she hated and despised herself for doing so, and she felt she would never be happy again.

Owen had to go up to London by the evening train, in order to be at Greatmills betimes next day. He had only time to change his wet clothes and make a hasty meal when he got back to Crane Court.

Madeline brought her work to the dining-room to sit with him while he ate, and for perhaps the first time in his life he would have preferred her absence. He did not allow her to guess this. But looking at him in the full lamplight, she thought his short holiday had not done him much good.

'Don't go and over-work yourself, O.o!' she said affectionately.

'No fear of that, Maidie. I like work, you know; besides, work I must, to give myself the ghost of a chance.'

'Will you get returned, do you think?'

'I can't possibly tell. Opinions change up to the very last moment. I am told it is three to one against me, but I mean to score a victory.'

'Don't be too sure, Owen. You may fail. It will be a new sensation to you, and I don't fancy you will like it.'

Owen poured himself out a glass of wine, as he pushed back his plate of almost untasted food.

'A new sensation!' he replied softly, with an odd little smile flickering about the corners of his mouth. 'I suppose no man likes failure; but perhaps it is good for one. If I fail this time, I shall succeed next.'

'When shall you be home again?'

'Certainly not before Christmas. I may run down then for a few days. If I fail, as you prophesy, I shall go

abroad directly the election is over. If I succeed, I shall have my horses up to Leicestershire. The hunting here is not much of it; besides, I am much nearer my constituents there. You must write and tell me how things get on in these parts. I shall be anxious to hear if the Honourable Ted gets in.'

So Owen Delmar left Crane Court to carry on his campaign, and no one, not even Madeline, had the faintest suspicion he had proposed to, and been refused by, Gertie Digby. Had she guessed it, it may be doubted whether Miss Delmar would have been quite so friendly to that young lady next time they met.

The General Election began, and all over England, in almost every household, the papers were scanned with unusual interest. The polling at Greatmills was to take place on one of the earlier days, but no one guessed why Gertrude Digby was so particularly anxious to get the first possible glimpse at the paper. She did not know herself whether she wished Owen Delmar to be returned or rejected. She was well aware the latter would be a bitter blow to him. She remembered the look on his white face when she had scornfully refused him, and she knew it would wear just the same expression if, when the poll was declared, his name stood second.

## CHAPTER XVII.

IN East Elmshire the suspense was still further prolonged, for the election there did not take place for some days after the one at Greatmills. Men and women, among whom were Geoffrey Mortimer and Gertrude Digby, worked indefatigably to secure the return of Lord Eastanley's youngest son, who all the time hoped he might not be returned. But, as Gertie said, it was the Cause, not the man, they worked for.

Prospects were not very satisfactory. Nobody objected to Ted Calverley, but he had not that strong personal popularity which might have disarmed opposition. And the majority of the newly-enfranchised voters were inclined to be exceedingly Radical in their views. It went hand-in-hand, as Gertie had expressed it, with their ignorance and stupidity. It took an East Elmshire native a very long time to get an idea into his head, but the idea of opposition to the classes above him had long been firmly planted there by the agents of the Labour Union, and other agitators, and it was hard to eradicate.

'Well, Aaron,' said Mortimer, meeting that functionary one day, 'how do you mean to vote?'

'I doan't know a gurt lot about it, zur, but I d'know

that I means to vote against Mr Delmar,' answered Futcher sulkily.

In spite of his vexation, the Squire almost laughed. He had had so many answers of a like nature from the 'free and enlightened British voter.'

'If Mr Delmar were standing himself, I could understand what you mean. But the question lies between Mr Ted Calverley and Mr Hammond.'

'I ar'n't got nothing to zay against Mr Calverley, zur. He be a pleasant genelman enough, and I do mind his coming and shooting here with you since he wur a boy like. Bean't him I do find fault with, but them as comes and sticks theysen up, and pretends to be what they beant.'

'That description does not apply badly to Hammond,' answered Mortimer, who knew perfectly well all the time what Futcher was driving at.

'It be Mr Delmar that I do mean,' said the gamekeeper sullenly. 'He zaid he hoped us 'ud all vote for Mr Calverley, and zo I know that I d'mean to vote for t'other chap. He zes, Hammond does, 'cos I heerd 'un, that it bean't fair for one man to have lashin's of money, and another nary mossel; and that's just what I d'zay too, and zo I be going to vote for un.'

It was rather irritating, and baffling too. Mortimer knew it was almost hopeless to try to persuade Aaron Futcher that the election was not a personal matter, and still more so to induce him to see that it was scarcely honourable to make the sole reason of his voting for Hammond opposition to the expressed wishes of his employer. The Elmshire natives had firmly grasped the fact of the secrecy of the ballot, and caught at it as an excuse to spite their masters, without suffering for it themselves.

The Squire spent some time trying to persuade Futcher to alter his opinions. They were standing by one of the stiles leading from the Crane Court park into the fields by a pathway which skirted one of the coverts, and Mortimer hoped he was getting the keeper to take a more reasonable view of the case, when they were interrupted by the appearance of Mr Delmar and Madeline on the park side of the stile, at which Futcher's brow clouded ominously.

Mr Delmar was not in the best of tempers that afternoon. He had been dining at the Digbys the night before, and had been secretly annoyed by being, as he thought, snubbed by the 'county.' Not that anyone had meant to snub him, but it was impossible for the county as yet to treat him as one of themselves. Mortimer had been there too, and Mr Delmar was unpleasantly aware of the difference between his own position in Elmshire and that of his impoverished landlord. The sight of the Squire talking to Futcher recalled these sentiments to his mind.

With Aaron Futcher, too, he was much annoyed. The head-keeper was always complaining of him—often, be it owned, with good cause. Then Mr Delmar had intimated to all his employés his wishes with regard to which way they were to vote in the coming election, and he was informed that half of them meant to vote the other way, and that Futcher was the ringleader of them all. Moreover, he was well aware of Futcher's animosity to himself.

He stopped short, and frowned as he came up to the stile.

'What are you doing here?' he said angrily to the

under-keeper. 'I know you were sent an hour ago to look for that bird we lost yesterday.'

Futcher moved off sullenly, with a scowl, and Mortimer knew all his trouble had been thrown away.

'I am to blame,' he said, in his stately way, 'for having detained him.'

'You might hold your conversations with him, if converse you must, out of working hours,' retorted Mr Delmar. 'You might remember he is my servant now, not yours!'

Madeline caught her breath, and made a step forward in dismay. She knew quite well her father did not mean to insult Mr Mortimer to the extent he had done; but what must the latter think? She threw such a deprecating, beseeching look at him, that the angry reply that had risen hotly to the Squire's lips remained unspoken. He was not naturally a hot-blooded man, but it required an effort to master himself, and he flushed deeply.

Mr Delmar, unconscious of this byplay, went on testily.

'That man is a hot Radical, I am told. I can't think what makes the people about here so Radical—Socialistic, even, one may say. It is quite dreadful!'

'Yes. I am afraid if all East Elmshire is like this part, Ted Calverley will not have much chance,' replied Mortimer briefly.

'Oh, do you really think so?' asked Madeline, in an interested tone.

She was so glad the conversation was drifting into a safer channel.

Mortimer looked down at her with a smile. He fancied he had discovered she took an interest in the Honourable Ted, and was not surprised she should be anxious to know about his chances at the election.

'I don't know very much about it, Miss Delmar, and one must hope for the best. You must be anxious, too, about your brother?'

'Yes; the polling takes place to-day. He will not admit it, but I don't think he has much chance either,' she answered and with a look at the Squire intended tacitly to convey her thanks for his forbearance, she drew her father away.

Mortimer too went his way, thinking of many things but not sorry Miss Delmar's look of entreaty had prevented him from speaking the angry words that had risen to his lips. Few men hated quarrelling more than he did, but he knew that had she not been present, a quarrel would have been inevitable between himself and his wealthy tenant.

The next day, Gertrude Digby, eagerly studying the papers, saw the polling for Greatmills announced, and Owen Delmar's name at the head. He had succeeded, as he had always maintained he would, but the smallness of his majority showed how sharp the contest had been.

Gertie said to herself that he would now be more insolent and conceited than ever, but somewhere deep down in her heart she knew she loved him all the better for his victory against overwhelming odds, and she felt that Greatmills had shown itself to have more sense than she had. Well, it did not matter now—it was too late. She had refused the only man she ever cared for, with contempt, and he would probably never speak to her again. Besides, if he had come back on the spot, and asked her the same question, she must have given him the same answer. Love or no love, how could a Digby marry a Delmar?—how could she link herself to the son of a soap-boiler?

Gertrude was more old-fashioned than Lady Eastanley, who contemplated her son's admiration for Miss Delmar with equanimity. But then, of course, if he married her, she would become a Calverley, and the soapy origin might be ignored.

Madeline sometimes passively wondered whether she would marry the Honourable Ted or not. To begin with, he had not asked her. His admiration and liking for her were plainly apparent, though they were not of a very active nature. Certainly they were not marked enough to presuppose a proposal, but then it was unlike Ted to be attentive to anybody.

To go on with, she was not at all sure whether she cared for him or not. She liked him, and he amused her, but whether this was all, she did not know, or whether there might be a warmer feeling for him deep down in her heart, only waiting to be developed. She was sometimes a little afraid there was, at others tolerably sure there was not. We may be pretty certain Madeline had never been in love, or she would have known more about it.

She had yet another cause of doubt. She did not feel at all sure about Ted Calverley's steadiness. Since she had known him, he had certainly lived very quietly at home, and latterly his attention had been wholly taken up by electioneering. And he always looked penitent and declared he was turning over a new leaf, and going to amend his ways. But still Madeline had her doubts. She never felt perfectly certain that necessity, and not choice, was not the cause of his repentance.

At last the polling day for East Elmshire arrived, and passed. The rival candidates drove about from place to place, and were received with alternate cheers and groans.

Everybody sported colours of some sort. Fidge Mortimer went about nearly covered with a rosette of Calverley's chosen colour, and was as much excited as anybody else.

But it was all to no avail, as far as the Honourable Ted was concerned. He turned out to be very much in the minority when the poll was declared. His rival had it all his own way.

'I am so awfully sorry, old fellow!' exclaimed Goeffrey Mortimer, who had gone to support his friend at this trying moment. It was, of course, a great blow to him, and to everyone else who had been working in the Conservative cause.

'Thanks, Geoff,' replied Ted, in a low tone. 'But between you and me, I am rather glad. Being in Parliament would have been such an awful bore!'

'Upon my word, Ted, you are too bad!' Mortimer exclaimed. 'Here have we all been fagging for you, and you are only delighted you are defeated.'

'Swear at me as much as you like, but don't tell my people, that's all. It will do no good, and they must think I am awfully cut up. Hear the shouts of those that triumph! Must I try to make myself heard in all this din?' For yells and groans of rage, and shouts of delight, were audible outside in the little country town market-place.

'Yes; make them your last speech, and tell them a few more lies!' said Mortimer, still vexed. 'If you had only worked as well as you spoke, you might have got in. Now we are represented by a beastly Radical!'

'Ah, Geoff, you should have stood yourself! They would have elected you,' replied Calverley, with the sweetness by which he was accustomed to disarm anger. It was difficult to be put out with him for long.

So he went out, and said a few graceful words to his supporters—but it was hardly possible to get a hearing in the Babel that was going on—and then he drove back to Eastanley Castle with his father.

Lady Eastanley was more distressed than she could express when she heard the result of the polling. She had set her heart on her youngest son being a member of Parliament, and representing his own native county.

'But I always was an unlucky beggar,' said Ted, with soft melancholy.

And then all the party discussed for hours the why and wherefore of his defeat, and what had been the causes that had produced it. All the party, except himself, and he sat very still and silent, close to his mother's chair, playing absently with her work. And she said to herself, how much he felt his disappointment, and how well he bore it, and she determined to persuade Lord Eastanley to let him go away for a little change. He had been good and steady for a long time now—surely he might be trusted.

So in a few days the Honourable Ted left the paternal roof to pay some visits, not, however, without going over to Crane Court to bid the Delmars farewell. He was not to be away for long. Owen, too, sent for his horses to meet him in Leicestershire, and so a period of calm came to our friends in East Elmshire.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

AT Christmas time Owen Delmar came home for a little while, for the first time since the elections. Madeline had missed him very much—they had for so long been a great deal together. But she had not found the winter days dull. She had had Fidge Mortimer, and he was more to her than ever. His father had given up making any opposition to their constant intercourse; perhaps he had found it hopeless.

'How I love you, my darling Maidie,' Fidge said to her one day, in an access of affection. 'I think I will marry you when I am grown up.'

'Will you, Fidge? That will be very nice. That's a promise. Now mind you don't forget.'

'Oh no! I won't forget. You mustn't forget either. Yes, I'll certainly marry you. I like you better than anyone in the world, except Dad, and Margaret.'

'But, Fidge, if you are going to marry me, there oughtn't to be any *except*.'

'Well, I'm not quite sure about Margaret. She's awfully cross sometimes, and you never are.'

'But Dad? You know, if you marry me, you ought to like me better than anybody in the world.'

'Oh, that's ridiculous, my Maidie! Of course, I shall always love Dad a lot better than anybody else. Why, he's—he's *my Dad*, don't you see?'

'Yes, my little man, I do see, and I was only laughing. Of course you must always love him best,' she answered, kissing him.

Yes, Fidge must love him, and he would love Fidge better than anyone else. Did Madeline know—she who had been coquetting with her fancy for Ted Calverley—why she minded this last clause so much? When Ted had been gone a fortnight, she knew she did not care for him the least, past all possibility of doubt. But had she yet found out the truth—that she cared very much for someone else?—that while she had been vaguely looking for love in one direction, he had come in another, and taken possession of that vacant citadel, her heart? Had she realised the love she felt for little Fidge was not all for his own sake?

If she knew, she put the knowledge from her as much as she could. For what was the good? It could bring nothing but pain. Neither she nor anyone else, she felt convinced, was anything to Mr Mortimer, compared to his small son, nay, even compared to the memory of that dead young wife of his who had slept so long under the stone cross in the little churchyard.

She did not deceive herself for one moment. She knew she was nothing to him,—that he was probably only aware of her existence at all because she was kind to Fidge. It was characteristic of Madeline Delmar that she accepted this knowledge quite calmly. It roused in her none of the pain and anger it would have in many people,—only a gentle sadness. No one should ever know her love—she

would have to go through life with just that one crowning joy denied her—that was all. It was inevitable, and it was her nature to accept the inevitable meekly.

Meantime, she could lavish her love on little Fidge, who returned it warmly, without ever pausing to inquire why she cared so much for him. And she could see Mr Mortimer very often, and feel that he liked her, and was more at ease with her than with any other member of her family. This was not much, but Madeline did not expect more.

When had she begun to care for Fidge's father? She could not tell. It was only very slowly and unwillingly she had learned that she cared for him at all. Certainly, she could not tell when she had begun to do so. Only she marvelled that she could for one moment have imagined she could care for Ted Calverley.

'Yes, I will marry you some day,' said Fidge reassuringly. 'I will tell Dad I am going to.'

'You must get his consent first, you know,' said Madeline.

'Oh, he won't mind!'

'I am not at all sure!' replied Maidie, and then she laughed to herself as she thought what Mr Mortimer's feelings would be if his son were twenty years older, and proposed to ally himself with a Delmar. A Mortimer of Crane Court wed a soap-boiler's daughter! In a few years Fidge would know that such an idea was preposterous.

But to return to Christmas time, the first Christmas the Delmars spent at Crane Court, and the Mortimers out of it.

There was a meet of the hounds in the neighbourhood on Christmas Eve, at which all the personages mentioned in this chronicle were congregated. Mr and Mrs Delmar

were there, in a carriage, and so, to the great delight of the latter, was Lady Eastanley. Geoffrey Mortimer was on foot, leading Shaggy, Fidge having persuaded his father, as a special Christmas treat, to bring him to the meet. Perhaps Mortimer would just as soon have stayed at home. He had been brought up to hunt, though it was years since he had been out with hounds. There was hardly an inch of the country he had not ridden over in his youth, and he was quite young enough still to feel an ardent desire to do so again. But he seldom denied his small son any reasonable wish.

Owen Delmar had induced Madeline to accompany him that day. She did so far more from the wish to be with her brother than from any longing to hunt, and she stipulated that she was to be allowed to go home when she liked. It was very cold—a dead, still cold, that portended severe weather, though as yet it was open, and Miss Delmar rather wished she had stayed at home. It is to be feared the sporting element had been left out of our heroine's nature. Fidge was delighted to see her, and she at once rode up to him and his father. So did the Digbys, for, of course, both Gertrude and Mr Digby were out.

In the pauses of her conversation with Fidge, Madeline heard Mr Digby ask Mr Mortimer whether he would join their family party the following day, or whether he intended spending it alone, as usual, and Mortimer thank Mr Digby for his kind invitation, and say that he thought he would adhere to his usual custom. She particularly noticed this, as she knew Mr Delmar had had hospitable ideas of asking Fidge and his father to Crane Court on Christmas Day.

'Geoffrey Mortimer is very unsociable—nothing will get him out on Christmas Day,' commented Mr Digby, as Gertie, Miss Delmar, and he rode off after the rest of the field, who were following the hounds to covert.

'I rather sympathise with him,' said Gertie. 'A family party is a fearful and awful thing!'

'You children have such odd ideas. We used to like it when I was young,' said Mr Digby. 'But that's not why Geoff won't stir out. It's because of Nellie.'

'Because of his wife?' said Madeline interrogatively.

'Yes. You know, it was a day or two after Christmas that she died. I believe Christmas Day was the last day she was well and they were together. Since her death, he always shuts himself up at Christmas. It was natural at first, I suppose, for he was awfully cut up when she died, poor girl, and now he has got into the way of it.'

Gertrude Digby had greeted Owen Delmar with a very distant bow, when she saw him ride up to the meet. She was not altogether surprised to see him there, for she thought he would probably be coming home for Christmas. It was the first time they had met since they had parted in the rain and mud that autumn evening. Recalling that, and all that had transpired then, she almost wondered, as she bowed, if he would cut her.

Nothing, however, seemed further from his thoughts. Not only did he raise his hat, and wish her good-morning in return to her bow, but later on in the day, happening to find himself near her in a lane, he kept his horse by her side for a moment or two, while he exchanged a few commonplace remarks with her.

'I suppose I ought to congratulate you on your victory at Greatmills,' she said, rather awkwardly, but it was so

strange to be talking in this everyday way to the man she loved, and yet had refused.

'Thank you, Miss Digby,' he answered. 'I said I would succeed.'

'But you are not always successful,' she retorted quickly.

'Not always for the moment, but perhaps I am ultimately,' he replied quietly, as he moved aside to let her father come up.

What could he mean? Gertrude wondered. Surely not that, in spite of her repulse, he would make her marry him yet. He could not mean that! A hot flush rose to her face at the mere thought. She experienced a new sensation—one of terror; for she had a presentiment he might succeed,—an odd feeling that this man would one day prove himself her master.

Meanwhile Madeline Delmar had gone home. She had stayed out with the hounds about an hour, all of which time they had been engaged in drawing a big wood, without giving so much as a whimper. Apparently there was not a fox in it, but the huntsman was determined to make every corner of it good. Miss Delmar grew colder and colder, until at last she could bear it no longer, and telling Owen she thought hunting was a very over-rated amusement, she rode off homewards.

She trotted most of the way along the road to warm herself. Not far from Craneham she caught up Mr Mortimer, trudging briskly along. He had made Fidge gallop off in front to circulate his blood, and he told Miss Delmar the child was probably at Ten Acre Farm by that time.

'I suppose we must not ask you to spare Fidge to us to-morrow?' she said, as Mortimer walked by her side, just

as he had done the first time they met. 'My small nephews and nieces are with us now, and we should be so glad if he would come to early dinner, or tea, or something.'

'I don't think I can let you have Fidge to-morrow, Miss Delmar,' answered Mortimer. 'Am I very disagreeable?'

'No; and I expect he would not care to leave you,' she said, remembering Mr Digby's information. She instinctively knew too—was it her love for Geoffrey Mortimer that made her so easily divine his feelings?—that this first Christmas spent away from Crane Court must have a peculiar sadness for him, and she would not say another word to induce him to separate himself from his boy for any part of the day.

'Fidge's Christmas Days are rather dull ones, I fear,' he said.

'But none the less happy, I expect, Mr Mortimer. He is always happy with you, I think.'

His face brightened.

'I hope so,' he said. 'You have a big party in the house, have you not?'

'Oh, yes! we generally have at Christmas. All the same, I don't particularly care for the season. I am always rather relieved when it is over.'

'You are much too young to feel that,' he replied quickly.

'Am I? I'm not quite a child, Mr Mortimer. Do you look upon me as Fidge's contemporary, I wonder?'

'Nearer his than mine, I expect. And that reminds me—a few days ago Fidge informed me that you are to be my daughter-in-law.'

'Oh, yes! I hope you have no objection? Do you mind very much?'

'Not at all. I give my consent. I am afraid it will have to be rather a long engagement. I hope you will not get tired of waiting, and throw him over. I cannot have my son's heart broken, Miss Delmar.'

'Can you imagine I should do such a thing? It is a great relief to me that you consent. I was afraid you would not approve of such a match for your son,' she said wickedly.

'Why not?' he asked; but without waiting for her reply, for he knew well enough what she meant, he added,—'Oh, yes! I give you both my blessing. Only, remember, no tampering with my son's affections! Here we part. Good-bye, Miss Delmar. I will send Fidge in to see you after church to-morrow morning, but you must not keep him long.'

Madeline passed through the lodge gates, and cantered home across the park, not sorry to find herself so close to a fire. Of course, when Owen returned, he told her she had just lost a capital run, and she was a good deal laughed at for her mildness; but she was not the least disturbed. Geoffrey Mortimer trudged home, laughing a little to himself at the absurdity of supposing the pretty, graceful girl he had just parted with would want to be his daughter-in-law, and the oddity of talking of his daughter-in-law at all. Miss Delmar had asked him if he considered her a contemporary of Fidge's? He rather wondered whether she thought him coeval with her father.

'Dad, dear old Dad! do, do be quick! I want my dinner so much. I think hunting makes one very hungry; don't you? Oh, Dad! hasn't it been jolly? I shall always go out hunting when I am grown up.'

'No one will be more pleased than I if you do, old man.'

## CHAPTER XIX.

'C'EST le propre de chaque douleur qui nous arrive de réveiller toutes les douleurs passées, que l'on croyait disparues et qui n'étaient qui endormies. L'âme a ses cicatrices comme le corps, et elles ne se ferment jamais si bien qu'une blessure nouvelle ne les puisse rouvrir.' So says Dumas, and so experienced Geoffrey Mortimer this first Christmas he spent at the Farm.

Christmas had ever been a sad time to him, as it must always be to those who have more ties with the dead than with the living. For him, too, it had a peculiar sadness. Christmas Day had been the last of the many happy ones he had spent with his young wife, for it had been early the next morning she had been taken ill. Every moment of the day was fraught with reminiscences of her. They had been so absolutely happy together.

That Christmas Day had been seven years ago, but never since the first sad anniversary had Geoffrey felt his wife's loss so keenly as he did this first Christmas of his exile from Crane Court. The new pain, intensified at this season, had started the old one afresh. He felt far more lonely at the little farm than he could possibly do in the old home he loved so well. He felt as if one thing after another were being taken from him. How could he tell

he would ever be able to go back to Crane Court? How could he tell whether Fidge would ever live there, or whether the old place might not have to be sold, as he sometimes thought must be the case, unutterably bitter as the thought was? And to the end of his days he would never have Nellie's sweet companionship again.

He was young enough to resent pain with keen impatience. He did not realise that when a wound aches most, it is often nearest healing. He was young enough to have a great longing for happiness,—a sharp envy of those to whom Christmas brought nothing but pleasure.

The sense of his poverty, the bitterness of exile, and the sad memories of his wife, weighed on him so heavily this Christmas morning, that it was only by a severe effort he could rouse himself to return Fidge's merry greetings and enter into the child's delight over his cards and presents. But he made the effort, for Fidge's Christmas must be a happy one, be his own what it might. It brought its reward with it, for as the little boy nestled close to him, his eyes dancing with delight, Mortimer remembered that, whatever he had lost, he yet had his son.

'Thank you, sir!' said Margaret presently, in return to his hearty greeting. 'But it don't seem like Christmas down here. I'm almost glad the mistress isn't alive to see us spending our Christmas in this little place, and them Delmars peacocking it at the Court.'

It was not a very encouraging remark to make to the man who was sad enough already, but Margaret's heart was very sore. Had she been a Mortimer herself, she could not have felt the exile from the old home and the altered circumstances of its master more keenly. And out of the fulness of her heart her mouth always spoke.

Geoffrey sympathised too much with her remark to resent it. Perhaps it was a good thing Nellie had been taken away before the hard times had come. But no! she would not have minded them with him, and how much easier even exile would have been had she been there to share it with him.

Madeline thought she could distinguish her little pupil's clear, sweet voice in the Christmas hymns that morning, and from her vantage ground in the chancel she could see his bright eyes wandering all about the church, taking in every detail of the decorations. To his mind, there could be nothing more beautiful than the stiff wreaths of yew and holly, and the devices in the windows. She noticed, too, how very sad Mr Mortimer looked. She could not help feeling rather a pang. That very sadness seemed to remove him so far from her. He was so much to her life—she could never be anything to his! It was complete, with its joy and sorrow, without her, and she would never have part or parcel in it.

When she got out of church, she found Fidge waiting for her, but Mr Mortimer was not visible.

'Dad said I might just come with you for a few minutes,' the child said, tucking his arm into hers under her furs. 'But I must not stay long, for he will wait for me at the lodge gate.'

'Yes; we won't be long,' she answered. 'But you must come in for a moment, Fidge. I have something to show you.'

Hitherto Madeline had refrained from giving her small friend presents, much as she had often longed to do so. She had instinctively felt that it would be better not,—that his father would not like it. But she thought Christmas

Day was a legitimate occasion for gifts, and so she had procured something she knew Fidge was longing for—a set of carpentering tools.

His delight knew no bounds. Presents were rare enough with him to be great events when they did come; and then he found Owen had one for him too. And Madeline showed him hers, and told him the lovely fur cloak she wore had been her father's gift to her. Everyone at the Court made much of little Fidge, all the visitors being captivated by his beauty and quaint ways; but he did not forget that Dad was waiting for him at the gate, and he would not stay long.

Madeline walked down the drive with him, in order to get a little more of his society. It was an ideal Christmas Day, bright, clear, and cold, with a sharp frost, that foreboded a stop to hunting for the present. Lovely at all seasons, Crane Court did not look its worst, nor did the picturesque park around it, in the clear, pale winter sunshine. The rich, warm colouring of the old house contrasted so well with the whitened grass and the leafless branches of the trees.

Madeline's heart gave a great throb of sympathetic pain as she and Fidge came in sight of the lonely figure of the owner of it all, standing just outside his own park-gates, his stately head a little bowed.

His grave face brightened as he saw them approaching, and he came forward to meet them with outstretched hand.

'A Merry Christmas to you, Miss Delmar,' he said.

'And a peaceful one to you, Mr Mortimer,' she answered gently. She felt either of the more hackneyed adjectives would be out of place to him.

'Thank you,' he answered simply. He noticed the

word she had made use of, and he liked it. Her Christmas greeting jarred less upon him than any other had done. Merriment and happiness might equally be strangers to him that day, but peace he could enjoy.

'Papa is very unhappy because you and Fidge are not coming to dinner with us to-day,' said Madeline, knowing Mr Delmar would be seriously vexed if she did not say something of the sort.

'Thanks!' answered Mortimer quickly. 'But we never dine out on Christmas Day.'

'I told him so, or else you would, of course, be at Daltons. Well, good-bye, little Fidge—I shall think of you more than you will of me, I expect.'

'I daresay I shall think of you, my Maidie. But, you see, I shall have Dad all to myself all day, so I sha'n't have *very* much time for thinking at all!' he answered, as he kissed her. Then he trotted off by his father's side, and she could hear his small tongue going like a mill-wheel all down the road.

She stood by the gate for a moment watching the two Geoffrey Mortimers as they disappeared, neither of them once looking back, until she was startled by a hand on her shoulder, and a laughing voice saying,—

'Well, Maidie, have you settled yet which you like best, —the father or the son—Mortimer *père* or Mortimer *fils?*'

'Oh, Owen, how can you talk such nonsense?' she exclaimed, turning sharply round, and blushing furiously, at which tell-tale symptom he only laughed merrily.

'I don't call that an answer to my question, Maidie. But never mind, you needn't confide in me.'

'I have nothing at all to confide, and I don't think I should tell you if I had, O.o.,' she replied, recovering

herself, 'I should wait till you had been in love yourself, then you might be more sympathetic.'

Fidge chattered even faster than usual to his father as they walked briskly to the Farm along the road, frozen dry and clean for once. It was wonderful that he had breath enough to keep pace with Mortimer's long strides and talk at the same time, but Fidge had always breath enough for conversation.

'Yes, Dad, I think you had better carry my presents —I might drop them. Aren't they lovely? Mr O.o. gave me that book, and my Maidie those beautiful tools. Now I shall be able really to carpenter properly, like you do. Wasn't it jolly of her to give them to me? Isn't she a *darling*, Dad?'

Mortimer did not feel prepared quite to endorse this enthusiastic statement, but he replied,—

'She is extremely good to you, old man.'

'She's a dear. I wonder how she knew I wanted them. There are a lot of children at the Court—her nieces and nephews and cousins, but I do believe she likes me as well as any of them. Did you see what a lovely fur cloak she had on, Dad? Mr Delmar gave her that as a present; and she had no end of Christmas cards—Mr Ted Calverley sent her a beauty, but she said she liked mine best of all. And Mr Delmar gave me a cake—look, here it is. It's got sugar at the top; doesn't it look nice?'

'Yes, very; but I shouldn't eat it now, if I were you, Fidge. Wait till after dinner.'

'Yes, I will. Oh, here's Aaron Futcher!'

'Good-morning, Aaron. A Merry Christmas to you!' said Mortimer, as they met Futcher, in his best velveteens and clean shirt. 'How's your wife?'

'Thank ye, zur, and the same to you. Her 'a been tur'ble bad, her have.'

'Yes, I was so sorry to hear she has been ill. I hope she's better?'

'Her be a bit better now, thank ye, zur. Miss Delmar, she came down to zee the missis, and sent her some wine and stuff as did her good.'

Geoffrey smiled,—

'So you see all the Delmars are not so bad!' he said.

'No, zur, they bean't,' conceded Futcher. 'Her be a tur'ble nice young lady, her be, and the missis do like she—and I zes, perhaps it be because he be come from London, and doan't know better, that her father be so queer.'

'I am glad you have come to that conclusion, Aaron. Good day!' replied the Squire, as he moved on. He was delighted—as delighted as if it had been any benefit to himself—that his rich tenant was in better odour with his employés.

'Now, Fidge, you must think what we are to do this afternoon. I will do just whatever you like to-day, you know, because it is Christmas Day.'

'Oh, Dad, let's walk to Pentden Hill! You promised we should go some day!'

'But it is a very long walk for you, old chap.'

'Not too far. I can walk a very long way now, you know. I am getting big. Besides, if I am tired, you can carry me. Then we will come back to tea; and after that, you shall tell me stories. I love Christmas Day. I'm so glad we don't go over to Daltons. It is ever so much more fun just you and me, isn't it?'

'Yes, Fidge, I think so.'

'Oh! it's much jollier. We don't want anybody else

do we? There's old Rollo coming to meet us! I expect he thought we were never coming back from church.'

The day passed pleasantly and peacefully enough, in the manner Fidge had mapped out. The father and son were always happy together, and mutually enjoyed the long walk in the clear, frosty air, and the quiet talk by the snug fireside afterwards, with Rollo asleep on the rug. He was terribly spoilt at the Farm, and generally usurped the best place in front of the fire. His elder and his younger master meekly yielded it up to him, out of respect to his grey muzzle.

But at length Fidge's bedtime came, even though it was Christmas Day, and he had been allowed to sit up later than usual in consequence. His brown eyes began to grow heavy, and his flow of chatter, not to cease —but to wander a little, when Margaret came in to announce it was time he should go. Geoffrey carried him up the little narrow, winding staircase, and then went down again to spend the rest of his lonely evening by his solitary fireside.

For seven years Geoffrey Mortimer's evenings had been solitary ones, and it might be imagined he was well accustomed to them. All the same, he never liked them. He was naturally a sociable man, though, owing to the force of circumstances, he had the character of being otherwise. He did not care very much for reading, and he often found the winter evenings long and dull. Seven years of it had not reconciled him to loneliness.

All the same, he had never thought of marrying again. Such a thing had simply never struck him in the light of a possibility. He would have laughed to scorn the suggestion that he could ever find anyone fit to take the place

Nellie had once occupied. Left a widower when younger than most men are when they think of marrying, the Squire had truly and deeply mourned his young wife. He never for a moment dreamed, as he sat smoking and staring at the fire, and thinking of those happy Christmases long ago, that he would ever do such a thing as fall in love again.

It may be doubted whether Fidge Mortimer had found much time to think of Madeline during the course of that long, happy day. But she had often thought of her small friend. Even in the evening, amid all the fun and merriment of the Christmas party at Crane Court, when it might fairly be imagined that Fidge's little curly head was prone on his pillow, her thoughts flew off to Ten Acre Farm. But it was not Fidge she thought of then, but of his father, sitting alone with no companions except ghosts.

She displayed her usual quiet cheerfulness, however, and no one guessed she had any cause for sadness, any more than they imagined that Owen, the triumphant hero of the Greatmills contest, the new M.P., was, after all, nothing more than a rejected lover, still smarting under his dismissal, a sting which not all his success elsewhere had assuaged.

## CHAPTER XX.

THERE were, as Fidge had told his father, several children staying at Crane Court for Christmas. The sight of all these young people put it suddenly into Mrs Delmar's head to have a children's party. As many of her guests were dispersing before the New Year, she had not long to get it up; but abundance of money smooths over most difficulties, and it was easy to send out a groom with the invitations. After all, there were very few families at all within reach to be asked.

'Shall I ask Gertrude Digby to come with her younger brothers and sisters?' said Mrs Delmar, as she wrote her notes.

'Yes, do, mother,' answered Madeline.

'You can ask her, but she won't come!' oracularly remarked Owen, who happened to be in the room.

'Why? is she engaged, Owen?'

'Not to my knowledge, but she won't come.'

In which prophecy he proved to be right. He knew his presence at Crane Court would keep Miss Digby away. He had not yet had time to carry out his intention of once more putting himself on ordinary speaking terms with her, though he had begun when they had met in the hunting-field.

Geoffrey Mortimer had been over at Eastanley Castle for a day's shooting. He walked home, and did not get in till some little time after dark. Margaret and Fidge were established in the sitting-room when he came home, Fidge busy using his new carpentering tools. He dropped his chisel, however, and rushed to his father at once.

'Dad!' he exclaimed, 'Mr Owen Delmar came to see you this afternoon. He said he was awfully sorry you were out, but he left a letter for you. There it is, on the mantelshelf. Dad, I can't think what's in it, but he said it had something to do with me. Do be quick and open it! Is it from my Maidie?'

Obeying this injunction, Mortimer opened the note.

'It is from Mrs Delmar,' he said. 'An invitation for you to go to a party the day after to-morrow, Fidge.'

'Oh, how scrumptious! Oh, Dad, how lovely!' and Fidge executed a series of capers, by way of giving expression to his joy at the prospect.

'The day after to-morrow!' said Margaret. 'That's the 29th, the day on which missis died. You'll not let Master Fidge go out to a party on that day, sir, with them Delmars?'

'Oh, Dad!' Fidge's capers suddenly ceased, and his brown eyes filled with tears of dismay at the notion that he might not be allowed to go.

Geoffrey Mortimer patted the little curly head at his knee as he answered the old nurse with gentle decision,—

'I shall let him go, Margaret. He does not even remember his mother, and, if he did, he is far too young to have any sad anniversaries in his life. The Delmars are very kind to him, and I have no wish to refuse their invitation.'

'Just as you think fit, sir; you are nearly as much took

up with them Delmars as Master Fidge himself!' replied Margaret, in a tone of vexation, with the freedom of an old servant.

Her master smiled, as he answered,—

'Am I, Margaret? Yes, old man, you shall go, and I expect you will have great fun. It is too late for the post, so perhaps you shall take my answer up to Mrs Delmar to-morrow morning. Don't let me forget to write it!'

As if Fidge were likely to do that!

So next morning he went up to Crane Court with his father's note. It had become an established custom that he was not to ring, but to go straight to Madeline's sitting-room. If he failed to find her there, he generally left Rollo as a hostage, and went all over the house in pursuit of her. What his father's feelings would have been had he known of this practice, may be imagined.

'My Maidie!' he said, as he kissed her, 'Dad says I may come. Margaret didn't think he would let me, 'cos it's the day mother died on; but he says I may. Isn't it lovely?'

'My dear little man, it would never have done if you had not come. I should not have enjoyed it a bit.'

'Wouldn't you, my Maidie? Oh, do tell me what it's going to be like!'

'No, Fidge, I sha'n't tell you anything about it, and then it will be a surprise when it comes. So your mother died on the 29th?'

'Yes; just four days after Christmas. It was seven years ago, 'cos I was eight months old, and I am seven years and eight months now. We always used to put flowers on her grave; but there aren't any at the Farm in winter, not even Christmas roses. Are they out here now? They generally are on the 29th.'

'We will go and see, Fidge. If there are, you shall have some to take home.'

Fidge went back to the Farm laden with delicate white blossoms and ferns which Madeline cut from the hothouses, which were kept up now in a very different style to what they had been in Mr Mortimer's time. Madeline saw the flowers next day, quickly shrivelling in the cold air, on the grave under the laburnum, with a sigh of pity for herself, destined to love a man whose love had been buried there for seven years.

Fidge was sent up to the party on Shaggy, that he might get there fresh and tidy, with old Jethro Haskell—the man who attended to the Farm garden, looked after Shaggy, and did odd jobs—to bring back the pony. He was to take Shaggy back in the evening to bring his young master home.

But when the time approached for him to start, the snow, which had been threatening for a day or two, was falling heavily, being whirled about by the sharp wind that was blowing. The ground was already white when Mortimer looked out, and it was by no means a tempting evening out of doors. Mortimer called to Margaret to tell Jethro he would fetch Master Fidge himself, and, closely buttoning his greatcoat, started forth into the night, much to Margaret's dismay, though she clearly saw he would be a better escort than rheumatic old Jethro Haskell.

It may be doubted whether Fidge had ever enjoyed himself much more than he did that evening. He had been to so few parties that this one had all the charm of novelty to him; besides, had he not his darling Maidie? In the warmly-curtained, well-lighted rooms, no one knew that it had begun to snow outside.

But all good things must have an end, and at last a message came that Master Mortimer was called for.

'It's Shaggy and old Jethro,' said Fidge! 'Dad says I must not keep them waiting, 'cos it's so cold. Oh, my Maidie, it has been lovely, and I am sorry it's over!'

'Your coat is in the outer hall, isn't it? I will come down with you to see the last of you, my dear little man. I'm so glad you have enjoyed it.'

Geoffrey Mortimer stood in the dimly-lighted outer-hall waiting for his small son. After his snowy walk, he was in no guise to appear in the drawing-room, and had not even sent up his name. He stood, with the snow melting on his rough coat and thick shooting-boots, looking half dreamily about the familiar scene, and listening to the sounds of distant music and laughter. Presently one of the happy voices seemed to be approaching, and down the shallow, wide oak stairs came Miss Delmar and little Fidge, hand in hand, the light from the inner hall falling on their heads.

There is an old, time-honoured expression, truer than such sayings usually are, about hearts being caught on the rebound. All that sad anniversary Geoffrey Mortimer's mind had been filled with sorrowful thoughts and reminiscences, and a sense of all he had lost seven years ago. The cold and darkness outside had seemed no unfitting accompaniment to his mood. Now, standing in the shelter and warmth, and watching the light shining on Madeline's head, the re-action came.

All he was conscious of was that he had never before realised how pretty she was. She was bending down to hear Fidge's talk, and she was flushed from the children's games, and all unconscious that any eyes

save those of a servant were watching her. She was very simply dressed in a soft white gown, with a few flowers at her waist, and the dark oak made a good setting for her graceful figure. Geoffrey told himself that Fidge's friend was an exceedingly pretty girl.

'Why, there's Dad!' suddenly exclaimed Fidge, as he saw the figure in the outer hall.

'Mr Mortimer!' said Madeline, as he came forward. 'Oh, why did they not show you up!'

'I asked not to be announced, Miss Delmar, for I am not in suitable kit,' he replied. 'I came up for Fidge, because it is snowing so hard, and I did not care to send out old Jethro Haskell.'

'Is it snowing? What a pity we did not settle for Fidge to stay the night here. How will he get home?'

'Oh, I shall carry him.'

'What! all the way? Hadn't he better stay here for to-night?'

'Thanks very much, Miss Delmar, but I think I will take him home, as I have come for him. Where is your coat, Fidge?'

Madeline found it for him, and Geoffrey watched her put it on and button it, carefully wrapping his comforter round his neck.

'It is awfully cold out,' he said. 'I hope you won't catch cold, Fidge.'

'He is hot from running about,' said Madeline. 'Wait one moment, Mr Mortimer, and I will fetch a wrap for him.'

She flew up to her room, and brought down the fur cloak her father had lately given her.

'We can roll him quite up in this,' she said, proceed-

ing to do so. 'Nothing keeps out the cold like fur. I think he will be all right now.'

'But the snow will spoil it!'

'Not a bit! It will only need shaking out.'

Mortimer gathered up the little bundle in his strong arms, and Madeline then tucked the warm furs round still more closely, so that hardly anything of Fidge was visible, Geoffrey watching the operation with interest. It was always pretty to see him with Fidge. He was so young to be his father, and to-night, either because of his rough coat, and tumbled hair, or from some unusual expression, he looked younger than ever.

'I am sure he won't be cold now. Good-night, Miss Delmar—I am afraid I can't shake hands,' he said.

Madeline opened the great front door for the two, and stood holding it as they went out, though Mortimer entreated her not to brave the cold. She wished them good night, and stood looking after them for a moment, as they went out into the snow and darkness, Fidge nestled warmly in his father's strong arms. How well she loved them both.

It needed strength to face the storm carrying a child of Fidge's size. The snow was beginning to get deep in some places, and Mortimer could not make very rapid progress with his burden. Fidge, peeping out through a fold in his wraps, thought it fine fun to be out so late in the snow. He began chattering hard. It scarcely required his father's 'Well, old man, how have you enjoyed yourself?' to set him off.

'Oh, Dad, it was so awfully jolly! I do wish you had been there. It just was fun. We had tea, first of all—such a tea, you can't think! The dining-room table was made quite long,—much longer than we ever had it, and

there were beautiful flowers on it, and bread and butter, and cakes and jam, and buns, and all sorts of things. Then we played games—lots of games—blind-man's-buff, and magic-music, and hissing and clapping. I wanted to choose my Maidie in hissing and clapping, but Mr Ted Calverley chose her first. But when it was her turn to choose, she chose me, not him. I can't remember all the games we played; and my Maidie, and Mr O.o., and Mr Calverley played too, and it was such fun. And then we danced. And then we had supper, and the supper was even more grander than the tea. And then you came for me. Oh, and I nearly forgotten—there was a bran pie; and I got all sorts of presents and sweeties. My Maidie is taking care of them for me. She looked so sweet—you saw her, Dad. Didn't you think she was lovely?'

'Yes, Fidge, I think she was.'

'Mrs Delmar had on—oh, such a beautiful dress, Dad! It was all sort of gold when you looked at it one way, and red when you looked at it the other.'

'It sounds to me rather like a bonfire, Fidge,' replied Mortimer, smiling to himself as he pictured the gorgeousness of the soap-boiler's wife.

'No, no! not a bit like that. It was beautiful. It was very long, and when she walked about it made a sound—a sort of squeaky sound, don't you know.'

'What, like a pig being killed?'

'Oh no, Dad! not like that.'

'Like a squeaky slate pencil, then?'

'Dad, how stupid you are! Why won't you understand? It wasn't that sort of noise at all. What are you stopping for?'

'To take breath, that's all. It's hard work getting through the storm. Did you think we were lost in a drift?'

But Fidge only replied by an indistinct murmur. He was getting sleepy, and in a few moments he was sound asleep, warm and safe in his furs. He hardly woke when his father, quite exhausted with his walk in the snow and wind, stumbled into the farmhouse and handed him over to Margaret to be put to bed. His own coat, and the fur cloak, were thickly powdered with snow.

Margaret marched off with Fidge at once, and soon had him in bed. She then returned to the parlour to see that her master was all right, and had taken off his snowy overcoat and boots. She found him resting in the great arm-chair by the fire, lighting his pipe, not sorry his rough walk was over.

'Master Fidge is all right, sir,' she said, 'and sound asleep.'

'I hope he has not caught cold. It's an awful night outside.'

'No fear of that, sir. He's as warm as a toast.'

'Thanks to Miss Delmar's cloak. By-the-bye, I hope the snow will not hurt it. Will you see to it, Margaret?'

Margaret took up the rich fur cloak with its silk lining, and looked at it with involuntary admiration.

'Much too good for the likes of they,' she said. 'It ought to belong to their betters.'

'I don't think Miss Delmar has many betters,' remarked Geoffrey lazily, innocent of any deep meaning.

But Margaret glanced sharply at him, and then without a word, but with unutterable things written in her face, she went out. 'Sits the wind in that quarter?' she said to herself. Was her master going mad after this young lady, like Master Fidge? Her common sense had always told her there was a possibility of her master's

marrying again, though he had been so long about it, she had almost given up thinking of such a thing. But to marry a Delmar!

Could she but have known that such an idea had never entered into Mr Mortimer's head as he sat, fast falling asleep from the contrast of the warmth within to the cold without, by his fireside. Had he been asked, he would have said that he had as little thought of matrimony, and was as faithful to the memory of his dead wife as ever. Did Margaret, with intuitive judgment, know better?

## CHAPTER XXI.

IT did not tend to reassure Fidge's old nurse when, two days after the party, Mr Mortimer walked up to Crane Court with his son to pay a call, and return Madeline's fur cloak. He could quite easily have sent it. But the Squire thought a call was due, and so he went. Owen had called upon him, and he had to return it. As a rule, Mr Mortimer was not fonder of afternoon visits than are most country gentlemen.

The Delmars happened to be all at home. By this time the majority of their guests had cleared away, but they were not quite alone yet, and, to eyes which had been accustomed to see it uninhabited, the drawing-room looked quite full. Fidge appeared to know everybody. After saying 'How do you do?' all round, he perched himself on the arm of Maidie's chair.

His father, talking to Mrs Delmar at the opposite side of the room, was suddenly seized with a horrible conviction that Fidge was saying something he ought not to have said. Miss Delmar, and her brother, who was near, were in fits of laughter, and now and then they glanced at him, as if he were something to do with their mirth. There was never any knowing what Fidge might say,

Geoffrey knew by experience, and he made desperate efforts to hear what he was talking about, and, at the same time, carry on a connected conversation with Mrs Delmar. Madeline saw his endeavours, and only laughed the more.

In truth, Fidge was dilating to her and Owen about his father's stupidity on the subject of Mrs Delmar's gown, and how he had likened it to a bonfire, a pig being killed, and a squeaky slate-pencil, and had been totally unable to grasp Fidge's description. His two hearers were intensely amused. They could easily perceive the fun that had prompted the Squire's pretended mistakes, none the less amusing from its variance with the usual grave stateliness of his demeanour.

Presently he rose to go, and crossed the room to summon Fidge, and say good-bye to Miss Delmar.

'You seem to have had great fun over here,' he said. 'May I not know the joke?'

'Certainly,' she answered demurely; 'since you were the perpetrator of it. Fidge was only telling us about your density the other night, when he was describing his party to you, and how you were kind enough to compare our mother's dress to a pig being killed!'

Mortimer looked horrified.

'Really, Miss Delmar—' he stammered.

But she interrupted him by a peal of laughter.

'No, it's no use trying to get out of it. Now we know how you bring up your son. Mr Mortimer, I am astonished at you!'

'This is too dreadful! Fidge has no discretion. I think after this we had better go. Good-bye, Miss Delmar.'

'Good-bye, Mr Mortimer. I am afraid you are a snare and a delusion!'

'Oh, why? What a thing to accuse me of!'

'Have I not cause? Yes, I have come to the conclusion you are not by any means what you seem. No, I won't explain any more. I leave it to your conscience, if you have one. By-the-bye, do you skate?'

'Yes, a little.'

'Then we shall see you on the water to-morrow, for it will certainly bear, if the frost goes on.'

'Thanks very much for asking me—'

'I haven't asked you. I should not think of inviting you to skate on your own pond. Of course, you would come if you liked.'

'I certainly should have not done so had you not asked me.'

'How ridiculous! I can't help it, Mr Mortimer, it is ridiculous. One has to be very careful with you.'

But Geoffrey, having already said good-bye some minutes, took his departure, making up his mind, as he hurried down the leafless avenue, that next day would certainly see him on the ice.

There was not very much skating to be had in that part of East Elmshire. The piece of water in Crane Court park was the best in the whole neighbourhood for that purpose. It was a grand opportunity for the Delmars to display hospitality. While the frost lasted—which it did for more than a fortnight—they kept open house, and had quantities of people every day to lunch and to tea. So it came to pass that Owen Delmar and Gertrude Digby saw a good deal of each other—for she could not resist coming to skate on the Crane Court ice, where she had skated every hard winter since she was a small child. She avoided him as much as she possibly could, but in

a circumscribed place it is by no means easy to keep altogether out of a person's way.

Owen certainly did not avoid her with the same elaborate precaution, neither did he often thrust his company upon her. But every time they were on the ice together, he persisted in exchanging a few commonplace remarks with her. This conduct had its natural effect. She gradually succumbed to his perseverance, and allowed herself to converse with him as she would have done with any other man. The worst of it was, she found that she was thus brought once more under the influence of the personal fascination he always exercised over her. But she could not help it. She could not skate in the Delmars' grounds, and steadily refuse to speak to their son. It was her fault and her folly if those short interviews with him were far more to her than all the rest of the day.

It was about this time that Owen promised to speak at a large meeting at Elmton for Mr Hammond, Ted Calverley's successful opponent. There was a dance in the town the night before, for which Gertie Digby went to stay with some friends. She found they were all going to the meeting in the Town Hall. When they laughingly suggested she had better stay, and accompany them, she protested she would like nothing better. She said she had never been to a Radical meeting, and she was anxious to hear what lies they would tell. But the truth was she knew Owen Delmar was to be the chief speaker. She had heard a good deal about his eloquence, and she was longing to hear him herself.

The Town Hall was a fairly large building for a south country town, and it was crammed to overflowing that

night. Political opinion ran rather high in Elmton ; moreover, people knew that the new member for Greatmills, who was much thought of by his party, was to speak. Gertrude, and her friends the Faulkners, had good seats a few rows from the platform. It was a larger meeting than any she had hitherto attended, but otherwise it was much the same in outward appearance. She had been to a good many Conservative meetings previous to the elections, and she could hardly divest herself of the idea that this was not one of them, and that she would not see the familiar faces, and hear the familiar speeches on the platform.

At first the style of oratory was very much what she had been accustomed to, only, of course, the opinions enunciated were different, and she had to listen to a good deal of abuse of her own party. Mr Hammond, she decided, was not so good a speaker as lazy, graceful Ted Calverley, who had never lacked fluency. The other gentlemen held forth much in the same style. She was a good deal perturbed at one time by seeing Owen Delmar's eyes fixed upon her. She had not anticipated that he would notice her in that crowd, but it was his habit to scrutinise his audience closely before he spoke, and his sight was quick enough to recognise any face he knew at once.

So Gertrude was there,—come to hear him, as he instinctively felt, and to criticise him too, pretty sharply. He was inured to a hostile audience, but he felt he had never had a more implacable adversary than she. It was with not unpardonable pride that he said to himself, —'She shall hear whether I can speak better than her country squires or not.'

'Mr Owen Delmar, the member for Greatmills, will now address the meeting,' announced the chairman sonorously, and Owen, looking slight and insignificant, but most thoroughly at home, came forward on the platform. He threw one sweeping glance over the sea of faces before him as he did so, and Gertrude felt his eyes rest on her for a second.

Directly he opened his lips, she knew that this was different oratory to anything she had heard. He possessed a clear, flexible, well-modulated voice, and knew how to make himself distinctly audible at the other end of the large hall, without appearing to exert himself at all. He began quietly and calmly, but he gradually worked himself up as he went on, and not himself only, but his audience. Not only was he completely master of his subject, but his language, at first merely simple and well chosen, presently warmed into eloquence such as most of his hearers had rarely heard equalled. What he said was diametrically opposed to all Gertrude professed to believe, and yet she felt herself completely carried away by the flood of his eloquence, the contagion of his enthusiasm, and the magnetism of his voice.

Frequent bursts of applause interrupted his speech, and when he at length sat down, having held his hearers spellbound for an hour, the noise was deafening. Gertrude could see he was outwardly calm, but his eyes were sparkling, and his cheek was flushed with enthusiasm. Certainly he could make people forget the insignificance of his appearance.

Soon after the conclusion of his speech, the meeting broke up. No one cared to hold forth much to an audience still under the spell of his oratory. Gertrude

was like one in a dream. She heard little of what her companions said. She was vainly trying to emancipate herself from the effect of Owen's eloquence. Remarks and comments on his address reached her ears on all sides as she slowly began to move down the hall with the Faulkners.

Just as they neared the door, and the crowd became denser, she was suddenly roused from her reverie by hearing the same voice that had lately sounded like a clarion through the building, saying quietly to her,—

'Good-evening, Miss Digby. Are you becoming one of us, that you are here to-night?'

'Not at all,' she replied, summoning all her presence of mind, and that hostility to him he had so nearly exorcised. 'I only came because I like to hear both sides of a case, and to find out what you could possibly have to say for yourselves.'

'And are you converted?'

She laughed scornfully. But he had watched her face while he had been speaking, and he knew perfectly well that he had carried her with him. He had noted the flushed cheeks, the misty eyes, and the tremulous mouth, that surely told him she had been taken out of herself. And he told himself, even while the hall was echoing with the applause bestowed on him, that she was not quite indifferent to him after all. There lay the true triumph of the evening for him.

They were outside now, and the crowd was quite dense. There was no row, but a good deal of somewhat excited conversation going on, for a contingent of the ordinary town loafers had assembled in the street. Mr Faulkner suggested they should walk to their carriage, and gave his arm to his wife, who was becoming nervous. Owen

offered his to Gertrude. She at first refused it, but was instantly nearly knocked down accidentally by a burly mason.

'Take my arm!' he said authoritatively, and she obeyed, devoutly wishing she were a little taller, and better able to take care of herself in a crowd. Owen was evidently well able to look after not only himself but her. He had been in very much more unpleasant positions in his experiences at Greatmills.

'Good-night,' he said, as he handed her into the carriage. 'I fondly hope, in spite of what you say, that some impression has been made on you to-night.'

'I am not so easily perverted,' she answered, as he closed the door, and the carriage rolled away, leaving him in the crowd and the darkness.

Mrs Faulkner was quite excited to learn that Gertie's friend had been none other than the brilliant speaker of the evening. And Owen leisurely extricated himself from the rabble around him, and joined his friends, who were wondering what had become of him, and longing to congratulate him on his success.

'I never saw an Elmshire audience so moved,' said one local magnate.

'Nor I,' said Mr Hammond magnanimously. 'But then we look upon Delmar as quite the rising orator of our party. I consider myself most fortunate in having secured his services to-night.'

Owen made a suitable reply, but by this time he was beginning to feel fagged and tired, and inclined for silence. He had been accustomed to speak to larger and more important assemblies, but he knew the presence of that one small, bright-haired girl had intensely added to the strain and the excitement.

## CHAPTER XXII.

ON one of the first days of the skating at Crane Court, Ted Calverley drove over in his high dogcart from Eastanley Castle, and soon proved himself to be the best and most graceful skater on the ice. He had come home for Christmas, out of deference to his mother's wishes, otherwise he had no affection for spending that season under the paternal roof. All the festivities Lord Eastanley liked to keep up in the place, he regarded as an unmitigated bore.

Moreover, to that class to which Ted belonged—the class of those who habitually overspend their incomes—Christmas is never a particularly cheerful time. Bills constantly arrived which filled him with consternation, for he had not the faintest idea how to pay them. He could only think of one plan, and that was to collect them all, to get engaged to Miss Delmar, and then to carry the whole collection to his mother, and beg her to persuade Lord Eastanley to settle them 'this once,' in order that he might start clear in a new life.

It was a desperate measure, but Ted felt desperate. So when Lady Eastanley mentioned one evening that she had heard there was skating at Crane Court, and that she

wondered Ted did not go, he kissed her and told her there was nothing he would like better. He told his valet his skates must be ready next morning, and then, well muffled up in furs, he drove off to Crane Court, where he proceeded to rouse the admiration of everyone by his skating, and to dance a sort of languid but tolerably marked attendance on Miss Delmar.

But, alas! he was too late in the field! He was aristocratic, good-looking, amusing, and graceful, but the time had gone by when she would have given him her heart. It was no longer in her own keeping. Unasked, she had given it to the grave, stately, impoverished Squire, who treated her with a certain courteous friendliness that had absolutely nothing of the lover about it. She told herself that it was only on account of Fidge that he troubled himself about her at all. But yet his friendliness was far more to her than all Ted's graceful attentions.

'Is it possible that the Honourable Ted is going in for Miss Soap-boiler?' said Gertrude Digby to Mortimer one afternoon, glancing to where Calverley knelt at Madeline's feet adjusting her skates.

'Don't speak so loud when you talk of your hosts in that way,' replied Geoffrey reprovingly.

'Hosts! Oh, Geoffrey, we have skated here before they were ever heard of!'

'That does not make them the less your hosts, since you could not skate here now without their permission.'

'How you do snub one!' she exclaimed pettishly. 'But how about those two? Does he mean anything? Surely he couldn't condescend to her?'

'I see no condescension about it!' replied Mortimer, rather sharply. 'Miss Delmar is an unusually pretty girl,

and a very nice one too. There would be nothing strange if Calverley were taken with her.'

'Good gracious, Geoff, one would think you were in love with her yourself,' said Gertie flippantly; but he gave her a look that rather frightened her. Otherwise, he completely ignored her remark, which she devoutly wished she had not made. She was not in awe of much, but she was in awe of her cousin Geoffrey.

His attention once called to it, Mortimer did not fail to observe how constantly Calverley was to be seen at Miss Delmar's side, and how he invariably walked with her, carrying her skates across the park to Crane Court when the setting sun warned the skaters their amusement must end for the day, and they trooped up to tea, before dispersing to their various destinations. As a rule, Mortimer only went part of the way with them, and then turned off homewards. He could not yet bring himself to go to Crane Court as a guest oftener than he could help. Indeed, it was by no means every day he was on the ice. But he was rather surprised at himself for going as frequently as he did.

'You haven't been here for two days, Mr Mortimer,' said Madeline to him, when he appeared rather late one afternoon. She, alas! was only too well aware of his absence when he was not there. On such days, she began to think skating was another over-rated amusement. 'You don't share the common sentiment that it is absolutely one's duty to skate every day and all day while the frost lasts.'

'Unfortunately, I have other things to do. I am a hard-worked farmer, you see.'

'You make one feel so frivolous! I almost wonder

you don't tell me you are far too ancient to enjoy such a youthful amusement.'

'I can't say I am, though I rather think I ought to be. But perhaps it is that I like to see you young people amusing yourselves. Well, amuse yourselves this way while you can—the frost isn't going to last very much longer.'

'Oh, I am so sorry! I like this form of amusement.'

'When it thaws, you will be able to hunt, and that will be better than any amount of skating. Everyone professes to be longing for a thaw.'

'I am not. Are you?'

'No,' he replied truthfully. 'I can honestly say I shall be sorry when the frost is over. Then I don't hunt, you see.'

'Why don't you?' she asked thoughtlessly.

It was a heedless question, but then Miss Delmar had been brought up among people who had no need to deny themselves anything for want of money.

Mortimer took the question as it was meant.

'Why don't I hunt?' he said placidly. 'Because I can't afford to keep horses—or even a horse, for that matter. I used to, in more palmy days, when I was young, but now Shaggy represents the whole of my stud.'

He spoke quite lightly and carelessly. He was far too proud to mind confessing his poverty; besides, deprivation from hunting was one of the least of the evils it entailed on him. Had that been all, he would not have minded it much.

But Madeline bit her lip, and coloured with vexation. She would have given anything not to have asked that question. It must have sounded in such horridly bad taste,—exactly what might have been expected from the

daughter of a *parvenu.* It was just the sort of thing she would have been vexed with her parents for saying. What must Mr Mortimer think of her?

He observed her silence, and then, glancing at her troubled face, awoke to the fact that something was amiss.

'What's the matter?' he asked abruptly. Then, as she made no reply, he repeated the question in a tone of concern.

'It's nothing!' she answered desperately, feeling things were going from bad to worse! 'Only I am sorry I asked you *that.*'

For a moment he did not understand her, and then, suddenly perceiving her meaning, he laughed merrily.

'Miss Delmar,' he said kindly, 'if that's all, cheer up. It was a most natural question to ask. You don't suppose I'm such a fool as to mind owning I'm poor. I should be an ass if I did, since it's obvious to everyone. But, of course, you can't understand what it means.'

'Oh, yes! I'm sure I can,' she answered hurriedly. Somehow she felt quite irritated that she was so well off.

He only laughed.

'Don't wish to,' he said. 'It's an unpleasant sensation. May you never experience it.'

'Money does not give one everything!' she murmured.

'Perhaps not; but there are a good many things one can't have without it,' he replied, with a short sigh. Involuntarily his gaze rested where Crane Court rose, beautiful and majestic, plainly visible through the leafless trees, and unconsciously his face assumed a sad and stern expression. It was one thing for her, this spoilt child of a millionaire, to utter her little platitudes about money, and quite another for him, an impoverished exile, to

endorse them. Then the absurdity of discussing the subject at all with her struck him all at once, and with a smile he turned to her and made some remark on a different topic. But she had seen his glance at his old home, and his altered expression, and she knew well enough what was in his mind. Only he evidently did not intend her to be aware of his pain.

But he could not quite shake off the effects of it. He felt unaccountably sad and weary as he walked home along the frozen ways with Fidge, having watched Miss Delmar leave the ice, with Ted Calverley at her side, and the majority of the skaters following. It would be rather pleasant to be like Ted, he thought, and go through life an irresponsible being, with no aim but enjoyment, and as little thought for the morrow as the lilies of the field. Probably now he would marry Miss Delmar, and live happily ever after. It was more than he deserved, meditated Mortimer, with an unusual touch of misanthropy, and a vague pang of envy. Some men had all the luck. What would Margaret have said had she known her master regarded marrying Miss Delmar as 'luck?' But he was a long way from realising himself one of the causes of his vague discontent.

'Dad, what *are* you thinking about? I've asked you three times whether I might go out ferreting with Aaron Futcher to-morrow, and you've never answered!' exclaimed Fidge, in a deeply-injured voice.

For the second time that day Geoffrey smiled at himself. Whatever Ted Calverley might be, certainly he was not without responsibilities, nor ever could be, as long as his son was alive.

He turned his attention to the ferreting question, and

discussed the matter with Fidge, until Ten Acre Farm was reached. But he sank into an arm-chair by the fire rather wearily. Margaret, who was bringing in the tea, noticed this, and said,—

'There now, sir, you're tired out. What ever did you want to go skating with them Delmars this afternoon, when you had walked all over to Penborne this morning?'

'I don't think I'm really tired,' he answered, rousing himself. 'I wanted to go this afternoon, for I had not been the last two days.'

'If things was as they should be,' said Margaret, putting down the teapot with a bang, 'you would not have to walk all that way home after skating on your own pond. And them Delmars with no end of carriages and horses, too!'

To this somewhat inconsequent remark, Mortimer made no direct reply. Presently he said, with a smile,—

'Do you hate living at the Farm so very much, Margaret? It's good of you to put up with it, if you do.'

The old woman faced round, with quite an altered expression on her rugged face.

'Me mind it, sir?' she exclaimed.

'Yes. I know it's different to what you have a right to expect, and that you have, perhaps, harder and rougher work—'

But she unceremoniously interrupted him.

'God bless you, sir, you don't think I mind that! I could be happy in a pigsty with you and Master Fidge. 'Tisn't that. What an old fool I am, for letting my tongue run on so. 'Tis only that I can't abear to see you and Master Fidge living anywhere but up there. Hard work indeed!' she added, with supreme contempt. 'Why, I'd like to see how the place could get on without me!'

'It couldn't—we should collapse altogether. I can't even contemplate such a thing. So, Margaret, I'm afraid you'll have to stick to us, even though we do treat you so badly. It seems to me we have depended entirely on you ever since your mistress died.'

But Margaret, not much given to sentiment, only replied by a sound something between a snort and a sniff, and, announcing that tea was ready, marched out of the room.

Meanwhile the merry party of skaters streamed back across the frozen park to tea at Crane Court. It was a still, cold, grey evening, and twilight seemed to have fallen earlier than usual. Lights shone with a picturesque, hospitable glow from the mullion windows of the beautiful old house. The party of young people, following a natural law, split itself more or less into couples, and of course Ted Calverley managed to get Miss Delmar to himself. She looked very lovely in the chilly grey twilight, her cheeks flushed from cold and exercise, and her face showing fair and flower-like out of its setting of dark fur. She thought her companion unusually silent.

'Mr Mortimer thinks the weather will soon change,' she remarked.

'Oh, I hope not!' exclaimed Calverley fervently.

'Do you really like this Arctic cold? I am getting rather tired of it.'

'I don't mind whether it is as hot as the Persian Gulf or as cold as Greenland, so long as I can see you every day, as I have done lately.'

She made him a low bow.

'What a magnificent compliment. Who says no one can can pay compliments nowadays? I am sure that was worthy of Sir Charles Grandison, and the days of the

minuet. By-the-bye, I believe you would dance a minuet rather nicely, if only you would take the trouble to learn.'

'I would if it would please you,' he answered. Then he added, with soft gravity,—'But I am really serious, for once in my life.'

'You don't mean to say so! I'm sure it is an unusual occurrence! What can be the matter? What are you serious about?'

'I mean that I really meant it when I said I could not exist unless I saw you every day,' he said, his eloquence a little disturbed by her levity. It is so difficult to make love to a girl who will do nothing but laugh at you.

'I hope you did not mean anything so foolish,' she replied promptly, and severely. 'Now, Mr Calverley, please drop that—I don't like it.'

'But if I am really in earnest?'

'Then I like it still less,' she answered shortly, putting an end to the *tête-à-tête* by hastening her pace enough to catch up another couple who were a little ahead.

Ted was aware he had been snubbed. He sulked till Crane Court was reached, and then, declining to have any tea, went off to the stables to get his dogcart. In a few moments he was driving rapidly home, not in the best of tempers, but yet a little relieved that he had a reprieve. The evil day was delayed a little. If only he could put off his creditors! Even that might possibly be managed, as it had often been done before, for a time. After, the deluge. But even the deluge might be better than matrimony.

Though the frost still continued some time, in spite of Mortimer's prognostications Calverley did not go to Crane Court any more, but allowed himself to appear extremely

depressed. Nor did he conceal the cause of his dejection from Lady Eastanley, whose motherly heart was ready to pity him. Indeed, Ted managed to appear so extremely melancholy, that even his father, unaware of his debts, and pleased with his apparent steadiness, raised no objection to his going abroad for a time with a friend. So he once more disappeared from East Elmshire—this time without a farewell call on the Delmars. But Lady Eastanley called one day, and let fall a hint that her son had gone away in low spirits, which she trusted might move Madeline's pity. She was the only respectable girl he had ever taken the least fancy to, and her ladyship was not disposed to let her slip lightly. A good wife, even though a soap-boiler's daughter, might be the salvation of her darling Ted.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE long spell of frost, which lasted almost all through the month of January, came to an end at last, and a period of mild, damp weather set in. Hunting people were happy once more. But Madeline Delmar was not. Her hunting propensities were, as we know, extremely limited at all times, and now she had no brother to take her out.

For Parliament was sitting—the session had begun unusually early—and Owen was in town. His hunters were at Crane Court, and he announced when the thaw set in, that he might run down any time he found he could get away, for a day or two. Hunting was a powerful attraction, but he had another equally strong one. He had no intention of letting Gertrude Digby forget him. Since he had watched her face during his speech at the Liberal meeting, he had felt very hopeful about ultimately obtaining his heart's desire.

But his time was very fully occupied, and he had not been down to Crane Court, though the open weather had lasted a fortnight. Madeline was verging on finding her beloved country a little dull, and to wish something would happen to vary the dull monotony of the days. A very common wish among young people, but an equally foolish

one. How can they tell but that when the vague 'something' they long for happens, they may not have cause to wish the dull monotony back again?

Nevertheless, Madeline was a little dull, and, but for Fidge Mortimer, would have been still more so. There could not fail to be times when she was oppressed by her secret and hopeless love for Mr Mortimer. We may accept the fact philosophically, and meekly submit to our fate, but all the same it is not cheering to know we are in love with one who we are perfectly certain can never return our affection. This was the case with our heroine. She did not complain, even to herself, but she felt depressed.

The wet, grey days, and the muddy state of the country, did not tend to enliven her. Except in the hunting-field, where, as has been said, she did not care to go alone, no one was ever to be seen. Fidge was her only amusement. Of him she continued seeing as much as ever. They rode together, and he frequently came up to the Court for his music-lessons. She felt she was growing to love the child more than ever.

So the winter days slipped peacefully by, and it seemed as if the calm might go on for ever. Geoffrey Mortimer walked about his farm, and attended to his ordinary business, and still looked with sad eyes at the home from which he was exiled. There was no breath in the damp grey atmosphere to foretell how near a tragedy was at hand. But it is nearly always so. In the very stillest moment, the storm breaks; in the most prosperous time the crash comes.

One afternoon Madeline, having nothing whatever to do, and not even a book to read, decided to drive to the

station to see if the box from Mudie's had arrived. Such an event would be a small excitement in itself. She did not come to this decision till rather late in the afternoon, but the station was not much more than two miles distant, and she thought she would just have time to get there and back while daylight lasted.

The way to the station was past the beginning of the lane leading to Ten Acre Farm. She encountered Geoffrey Mortimer striding along in the same direction she was going. She happened at that moment to be walking her pony up a hill, so they exchanged a few words. He told her he was going towards the station to meet Fidge, who with Margaret had gone to Elmton for a day's shopping, and would be returning by the 5·5 train.

'I shall just be in time to meet that train, unless it is marvellously punctual,' said Madeline; 'so I shall see Fidge, and be able to give him and Margaret a lift part of the way back. I am only going to fetch a book-box, which probably won't be there at all.'

'Thanks very much, Miss Delmar. If you really will be so kind, I shall not hurry, for I want to talk to the man who lives in this cottage.'

'All right; we shall meet you somewhere on the road. A gloriously muddy road it is, too! I don't think much of your Elmshire roads, Mr Mortimer!'

'Oh, don't say a word against them! They are not bad in their way!'

'It's a very disagreeable way, I think. *Au revoir*, then!' and, with a nod, Madeline let her pony trot on.

Mortimer went into the cottage. His reason for visiting it was a question that had arisen about repairs, for it was on his own estate, and he managed all such business

himself. He now went thoroughly into the matter, without hurrying at all. He could hear if anything came along the road, so that he would be sure not to miss Fidge and Miss Delmar, and he was not the least disturbed because they were later than he expected. Trains on that branch line were rarely punctual.

In the days to come, it seemed strange to him that he could possibly at that moment have been calmly discussing tiles and whitewash, with no other thought in his mind,—no presentiment to warn him of what was coming.

Miss Delmar reached the little station a minute or two after the train was due, but she could see it was not in. She pulled up at the door of the booking-office, and her groom went to the pony's head. She had hardly been standing there a moment, when the station-master came up to her, looking very grave.

'If you have come to meet the 5·5 train,' he said, 'it is no use waiting. It will not be in. There has been an accident.'

Madeline felt her heart turn to stone within her. The man's tone was so calm, the news so appalling.

'Not to the 5·5 train!' she cried. 'What sort of an accident?'

'We know nothing except that it is a bad accident, and that it happened between Barleigh and Westworth.'

'Oh, Master Mortimer and his old nurse are in the train! Is there no chance of hearing more?'

'Not much, I am afraid. The wires are all engaged telegraphing down the line.'

Madeline waited for what seemed to her an eternity, but no further message reached the station. All her thoughts centred round one point — she must tell Mr

Mortimer. At last, when the station-master told her there was no chance of hearing anything definite for some time, she drove quickly off. He must be told, and she must tell him.

He came out to meet the carriage when he heard it coming, the repair question being satisfactorily settled.

'What, have they not turned up?' he said, when he saw she was alone. He was not the least alarmed—nothing was more likely than that Fidge and Margaret should have missed their train. There was another about an hour later.

'No, the 5·5 is not in. Don't be alarmed, Mr Mortimer—it may not be a bad one—I can hear so little—but there has been an accident,' she said, speaking as gently and quietly as she could.

It was getting dark, but there was light enough to show Madeline what she never forgot—the look that came over the Squire's handsome, healthy face at her words.

'Fidge is dead!' he said, quite quietly, but in a tone of absolute conviction.

He was certain this was the case, and that she was trying to break the news to him. He felt no surprise. Fidge was everything to him, Fidge was all he had left, and therefore Fidge was taken. Some men would have said Fate could not be so cruel, but Mr Mortimer knew by experience that Fate could be very cruel indeed sometimes.

'Ah, no. I hope not!' cried Madeline. 'Nothing is yet known except that there has been an accident between Barleigh and Westworth. I could hear no particulars. He may not even be hurt. Get in, and I will drive you back to the station more quickly than you can walk. By this time more may be known.'

Mortimer obeyed her silently, and she drove swiftly back to the station. She tried to say a few cheering words as they went, but he made absolutely no response. He seemed paralysed by the awful terror that lay at his heart like ice. He sprang out as soon as they reached the station, and Madeline waited to hear if there was any fresh news. He came out to her in a few moments.

'It has been a bad accident,' he said, in a curious, still voice. 'There are a great many killed and injured. The six o'clock up train will be starting directly, and will go as far as Westworth. I shall go up in it. I shall get there faster that way than any other.'

'Yes; and I do hope, Mr Mortimer, you will find him all right. It may not be as bad as they say.'

'It is this awful suspense,' he murmured.

'Yes, I know. Oh, Mr Mortimer, I do feel for you! I wish I could help you!' she exclaimed.

Her whole soul went out in pity for him, at the sight of his white, stricken face. She knew, if no one else did, how much Fidge was to him. But she could do no good by waiting at the station, and fearing her people would be alarmed at her absence, she drove home, to spend hours of anxiety that seemed like weeks in length. What would she do if anything had happened to her darling little Fidge?

Meanwhile Geoffrey Mortimer restlessly paced up and down the little platform, wearily waiting the arrival of the up train. The minutes dragged endlessly, and he felt he must go mad if the train did not soon appear. It was so terrible to have to waste such precious time, when Fidge might be hurt—dying—in any case, longing for him. There were a couple of passengers waiting besides him-

self. They were going up the line on their ordinary business, and they stood about and discussed the accident in a matter-of-fact way, for, except inasmuch as it impeded the traffic, it did not concern them.

At last the bell was rung, and in the semi-darkness appeared the two red eyes of the train. Geoffrey sprang into the first empty compartment he saw, but even then it seemed an eternity before they started. The station-master and the guard held a long conversation, as if time were not of the slightest consequence. Mortimer felt he had been sitting there for years when the train moved off.

It was not very dark, for though the day had closed in, the moon was rising, and it grew lighter every moment. Every inch of the way was familiar to Geoffrey Mortimer, but he stared out of the window as if he had never seen it before. Was he going mad? Little things he saw impressed themselves on his mind with strange distinctness, and he found himself speculating whether a certain tree had been blown down in the late snowstorms or not. They stopped at one station before Westworth, and he looked at the people who got in and out, with an idle curiosity. He could remember many of their faces afterwards. All his faculties seemed to be abnormally strengthened, yet all the time he did not for one second lose sight of his sickening anxiety.

Westworth was reached. It seemed to Geoffrey as if it were days since he had left home. The little country station was a scene of great confusion, and a crowd was fast collecting. An engine and a few carriages were drawn up at the opposite platform, and somehow Mortimer learned —he did not know how he obtained the information—that in those carriages were all who were uninjured, being con-

veyed on to their destinations. His heart gave a great bound. Fidge and Margaret might be there.

In a second he had crossed the line, and was passing along, looking into each carriage, and calling on Fidge and Margaret by name. But no answer came—Fidge's face was not among the pale, scared ones that looked out at him. And then all hope died, and he felt certain Fidge was killed. He was told that the train he had come by was to be taken on as near the scene of the accident as possible, so that passengers might walk the piece of rail impeded by the *débris*, and be taken on by a train sent out from Elmton for them. He heard somehow, too, that several people had been killed, and already identified, and that they were all second-class passengers. Fidge and his nurse would have been travelling second class.

He resumed his seat, and the train moved on slowly and cautiously. The scene of the accident was about two miles from Westworth. The train did not go much faster than a horse could trot, and Mortimer felt the tardy pace to be maddening. He had an insane desire to get out and walk. He stood erect in the carriage, and clenched his fists. Sitting still had become impossible.

Yet when the already slow pace began to slacken, and he knew the goal of his journey was reached, a great terror seized him. What was he about to see? Only that morning he had parted with his son so full of life and happiness—how would he meet him again?

The train stopped, and Geoffrey sprang down on the line. The moon was shining brightly now, and the scene was plainly visible. Some way ahead was a dark mass, by which some lights were burning. Towards this he hurried, walking as does a man in a hideous

dream, stumbling blindly over the iron rails and the sleepers.

It was a ghastly sight enough that presented itself to his eyes in the moonlight, though by that time all the killed and injured had been removed. The train had shot off the line going round a sharp curve at a great pace. The carriages were piled one upon another in strange confusion, some of them almost entire, others smashed into splinters. It seemed impossible that anyone who had been in them could be alive.

There were some men standing about, and to them Geoffrey appealed to know where Fidge had been taken. They knew nothing of the child. All the passengers too much hurt to go home had been taken to the Elmton Hospital, they said, by a train sent out for that purpose. One or two, and all the dead bodies, had been carried to a farmhouse about a quarter of a mile off. They pointed out where it was to Mortimer, and recommended him to go there first, and then, if he did not find Fidge there—he recognised what was meant—go on to Elmton. And one man asked if it was a boy he was searching for, and said he knew there was a boy killed who had not yet been identified.

Without a word, Geoffrey made his way in the direction of the farmhouse, from which the railway was separated by a couple of fields. Was it only to 'identify' the dead body of his little son that he had come? Was he in a few moments to see Fidge mangled and lifeless? God help him now, for surely now, if ever, Geoffrey Mortimer needed His help.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

THAT same day, which was the first fine one after a week of almost continuous rain, Mrs Digby and Gertrude had gone to Elmton. Their mission there was twofold—to have an interview with a dressmaker, for there was a great ball at Eastanley Castle in prospect, and to see some friends. Gertrude and her mother parted company during the afternoon, agreeing to meet at the station in time to go out by the 5·5 train.

Elmton, it may be remarked, was the principal shopping town within reach of East Elmshire. Moreover, it was the junction at which travellers left the London trains to get on to the branch line by which Crane Court was reached.

Gertrude arrived at the station before Mrs Digby. She made her way to where the train was drawn up at a side platform, ready to start when the London express had come in. She selected a compartment, but did not get in. By standing on the platform, she would more easily see her mother when she came.

Mrs Digby had not appeared when the London express whizzed in. Gertrude was much amazed to see Owen Delmar approaching, an obsequious porter carrying his fur rug, and other belongings, his own man-servant, too, in

attendance. He was wrapped in a thick, fur-lined travelling coat, which gave quite an air of importance to his insignificant person, and Gertrude reflected it was not a bad thing to be rich.

He stopped to speak to her directly he saw her, according to his usual custom.

'Are you going out by this train?' he asked.

'I don't know. We were, but mother has not turned up, so I suppose we must wait for the next. There is one in about an hour. I did not know you were expected in these parts?'

'Nor am I. I only found out I could get off half-an-hour before I started. I had not even time to telegraph to my people from London.'

'Ah, I thought they could not know you were coming. I saw your sister yesterday, and she said nothing about it. She is generally so extraordinarily full of you!'

'If she makes me her topic of conversation, I am afraid she must bore you horribly, Miss Digby!'

'She might find a more congenial one, I own, but I can allow for sisterly infatuation!' retorted Gertrude acidly.

'That is truly kind of you. Have you had good hunting lately?'

'I have had none. My horse is lame.'

'Oh, what a bore! I hope he'll soon be all right. I hope to get a day to-morrow, but, if that's the case, I am afraid we shall not meet.'

'No, we sha'n't,' said Gertrude, with an accent of relief. 'And if we did, we should probably not see much of each other!'

At this moment little Fidge and Margaret, each much laden with parcels, appeared hurrying along, the old nurse

evidently in great terror that she was late for the train, as indeed she almost was. Owen went forward to meet them, relieved them of some of their packages, and put them into a carriage with as much consideration as if Margaret had been a lady. Gertrude was fain to confess to herself his conduct was essentially that of a gentleman. Then he stepped into his own compartment, and the obsequious porter shut the door. No Mrs Digby had appeared, and the train went off with a whistle, leaving Gertrude standing on the platform, wishing she could hate Owen Delmar half as much as she pretended to.

In less than five minutes after the train had started, Mrs Digby arrived at the station. She was much perturbed at finding she had missed her train. Gertrude calmed her by reminding her there was another in an hour's time, and suggesting that they should send off two telegrams, one to Mr Digby at Daltons, and another to the coachman at the station, to tell him to wait there for them. These two telegrams, being duly despatched and delivered, prevented any anxiety being felt about Mrs Digby and her daughter, when the fate of the 5·5 train was known.

Having sent off their telegrams, they had some tea, and then proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as they could by the waiting-room fire, grumbling not a little at the hour they had to wait. It was a cold evening —the rain and fog which had lately been hanging about had cleared away, and a sharp wind was blowing from the north-east.

Tired of doing nothing, Gertrude presently made an expedition out to get some papers. She found the station in great confusion. News of the accident had been re-

ceived, and an engine with a few carriages, in one of which went a couple of doctors, was being sent out to give what help could be bestowed, and to bring back the sufferers. Gertrude could not hear much in the general confusion, except that it had been a very bad accident, and it was feared many lives had been lost.

She did not go back at once to her mother, but stood. with white lips, her hands locked together, and a look of agony, had there been anyone to note it, in her eyes. There was room but for one thought in her mind. Owen Delmar was in that train—she had parted from him with bitter words—she loved him—and she would never see him again. His last thought of her must have been a bitter one, and now he would never know but that she really hated him. Oh, to see him once more—to beg his pardon for her unkindness, to tell him she did not mean it! But it was too late.

By the time she returned to her mother, Mrs Digby had already heard of the accident. She was a nervous, delicate woman, and the tidings gave her a great shock. Gertrude found her much upset.

'Is it not terrible, Gertrude?' she cried. 'Only think; but for the Faulkners' clock being so slow, we should have been in that train!'

Gertrude had as yet had no time for this thought.

'Fidge Mortimer was in the train,' she said, 'and old Margaret, and—and Mr Owen Delmar!'

'Little Fidge—oh, how sad! What will Geoffrey do? Oh, my dear, fancy if we had been there; and had I been three minutes earlier, we should have been! What a fearfully narrow escape.'

'We have escaped, but they have not. Oh, mother,

do you think he is killed?' For once in her life Gertrude broke down utterly, and sobbed convulsively. Mrs Digby was not the least surprised by her emotion, and was far too agitated herself to guess who it was for.

It was not in reality very long, though it seemed an eternity, before the train that had been sent out with assistance returned to Elmton, bringing with it the majority if the sufferers. By this time, a small crowd had collected in the station, composed partly of those who had relations or friends in the doomed train, partly of mere idlers, come from vulgar curiosity. Already news of the tragedy was spreading far and wide.

Mrs Digby and Gertrude were on the platform when the train drew up. One of the very first people to get out of it was Owen Delmar. Gertrude sprang forward with a low cry, and he caught sight of her at once. For the first time their hands met. He spoke first.

'Thank God, you were not in that train!' he said.

'You—are you all right? are you hurt?' she cried incoherently.

'No, no, I am not hurt at all. I have had a wonderful escape. But it was too awful—many are killed!'

Gertrude turned her head away, and did not answer. She was struggling with a return of her attack of sobbing, and could not speak.

Owen Delmar had within the last hour been very near death—he had seen his fellow-creatures killed and mangled around him. He had gone through a most terrible experience, one calculated to make a deep impression on a far less sensitive nature than his. But at that moment he was conscious of a great and overwhelming joy. For he saw, past all possibility of doubt, that Ger-

trude loved him, and, knowing this, he felt he could not fail in gaining his heart's desire. But in the uncertain light no one saw the sudden look of happiness that altered his pale face, which had hitherto worn a strange, awe-struck expression.

He moved away to help to lift a man out of the carriage he had come in, but in a few moments he rejoined the Digbys, to find Gertrude had recovered her self-command. Her mother was much shocked at the many sad sights she saw. It had been a ghastly accident, and it so happened that the train, usually the fullest one in the day, was much crowded. Several lives had been lost, and hardly anyone escaped uninjured. Even those who had not been much hurt were terribly shaken, and their nerves shattered.

Some of the sights Mrs Digby and her daughter witnessed on the platform of the Elmton station that evening were most heart-rending. It was a relief to turn from them to Owen Delmar's quiet composure.

'How awful it is!' exclaimed poor little Mrs Digby, who was in an overwrought, voluble condition. 'What quantities of people have been hurt, and what a dreadful state some of them are in. You are most fortunate, Mr Delmar, to have got off so well. We heard it had been a bad accident, and we were so anxious. We spent such a dreadful time. Poor Gertie was quite upset.'

Gertrude was heard to mutter something indistinct about Fidge and Margaret, but Owen was not taken in. He knew her anxiety had been for him, and he knew, too. that it must have been very great before self-contained Gertrude was 'upset' to such unobservant eyes as her mother's.

'Oh, yes! Fidge Mortimer!' said Mrs Digby. 'Gertrude says he was in the train with his old nurse. Do you know anything about him, Mr Delmar?'

'Fidge is alive,' he answered gravely. 'But I am afraid he is much hurt. His arm is broken, and he must have been fearfully bruised and shaken as well. I carried him to a farmhouse there was near, and I would have stayed with him, but the farmer's wife knew Mr Mortimer, and promised to do everything for him; and I thought I could be more use back at the accident. Then I could not leave the poor fellow you saw carried out. He was in agonies, and had no one to look after him.'

'And Margaret?' asked Gertrude.

'Margaret is dead,' he replied, in a low, hushed tone.

Both his hearers gave a little cry. Death had come very near to them.

'She must have been killed instantaneously,' he went on. 'She was quite dead when I found her. Little Fidge was clasped in her arms, and I believe she must have died trying to save him, for she was thrown out on her head, and she could have made no effort to save herself. It was quite difficult to take him from her, she held him so close.'

It was even as Owen surmised. In any sudden and fearful emergency, such as a railway accident, a fire, or a shipwreck, there are always—all praise to human nature—deeds of heroism done, many of which are never recorded. Old Margaret, faithful to the last, had died for her young master, and thus put the seal to a life of devotion. It was a terrible death—terrible from its awful suddenness—but we may be sure Margaret would have chosen no other, than to die for Fidge.

Other deeds of heroism were done that day, as when sufferers forgot their own injuries to help others, but none shone so brightly as that of the faithful old nurse. Her arms had held little Fidge when he had been a baby—when cold in death they still clasped him. Thanks to Margaret's love and care, he had never missed his mother, and no mother could have more unhesitatingly given her life for his, than she did that day.

Poor Margaret! To her, and to others, life coursing strongly in their veins, their heads full of a thousand little everyday cares and plans, in one brief, awful moment the end had come. From such sudden death well may we pray to be delivered! One moment of terror, and agony, and chaos, and then—

## CHAPTER XXV.

WHILE Owen was still with Gertrude and her mother, a porter came up, and informed them that the down train was about to start, if they wished to get home. They would have to walk past the accident, but they would find a train the other side—it was the one Mortimer had come in—waiting to take them on.

By this time Mrs Digby was in a half-hysterical condition, and declared she could not possibly get into a train that day. The Faulkners would give her a bed, she was sure — anyhow, she could not go home that evening. While she was speaking, Mr Faulkner, having just heard of the accident, arrived, much delighted to find the Digbys, on whose account he had been terribly alarmed, had never been in the doomed train at all. He said his wife would be delighted if Mrs Digby would stay the night, and that it was far better she should do so. He wanted Gertrude to stop too, but she said she would go home, as her father was alone.

'Really, I hardly like your going by yourself!' said Mrs Digby helplessly.

'If Miss Digby will allow me, I shall be very glad to escort her,' said Owen Delmar quietly.

'Thanks. I shall be very glad!' answered Gertrude, subdued for once, as she entered the compartment by the door of which Owen stood. He followed her, rather cutting short Mrs Digby's profuse thanks, and the train started. Mr Faulkner carried off Mrs Digby, who proved to be so completely knocked up, that it was very lucky she had not attempted to go home that night.

It was very cold, and as the train moved out of the station, and began to quicken speed, Owen noticed that his companion was shivering. It was not the cold, however—of which she was scarcely conscious—that caused her to do so. He drew a plaid she had with her closely round her, and as he did so she observed that he had no longer either his fur-lined coat or his warm rug. The former he had taken off to wrap round Fidge Mortimer, and had forgotten to claim it again, the latter he had only rescued from the wrecked carriage to put over a poor wretch who lay shuddering in death agonies. He looked very pale and slight and insignificant in his grey suit, and Gertrude noticed with horror that there were stains of blood, not his own, on his shirt-cuffs.

'You must be far colder than I!' she exclaimed impulsively. It was the most considerate remark she had ever made to him, and it was not lost upon him. Perhaps he would not have thought it dearly bought at the price of far greater cold.

'Oh, no! I do not mind it,' he answered quietly. 'I expect you were chilled waiting on that draughty platform.

Gertrude shivered again, from the recollection of all she had gone through in that waiting.

'Was it very dreadful?' she asked. 'Were you very frightened?'

'Frightened is not exactly the word,' he replied. It was too sudden, too awful!'

'What was it like?'

'I can hardly tell you, Miss Digby. You know the train often sways and shakes about a good deal going round that sharp curve between Barleigh and Westworth. This evening it seemed to shake more than ever, then it gave two or three terrific bumps, and there was a great crash. I know nothing more until I found myself scrambling out of the smashed railway carriage.'

'What did you think of? Did you know at once what had happened?'

'Yes, I think so. I remember saying to myself, just as the crash came, that this was a railway accident. I believe my first thought was, when I found I was alive, how thankful I was you were not in the train.'

'You thought of me *then?*'

'Why, yes; of course,' he answered simply.

Gertrude was silent after this, and he said nothing more. He was quite alone with her, with no fear of interruption, and she was softer to him than she had ever been. The experienced reader of fiction may wonder why he did not seize so favourable an opportunity to urge his suit, and once more tell her of his unchanged love.

But Owen Delmar did nothing of the sort. It may be doubted if he ever even thought of it, but if he did, there were many reasons against it, any one of which would have been sufficient to deter him. In the first place, he had promised to escort her home, and he would certainly not fulfil this promise, at any rate in the spirit, by taking advantage of her lonely and dependent condition to make love to her. Besides, she was upset and overcome, and

towards himself her feelings had gone through a great reaction consequent on her anxiety about his safety. It was not under these circumstances, when possibly she might repent it afterwards, that he desired to make her reverse the decision she had come to that wet autumn afternoon in the lane. Moreover, though he had been unable to help experiencing a sudden great joy when he discovered for certain she loved him, Owen Delmar had been very lately in the grim presence of death, and he felt anything like love-making would be out of place so soon. So he let the favourable opportunity slide, and kept silence.

The scene of the accident was reached, and the train drew up. He alighted, and helped Gertrude out. To descend from a railway carriage on to the level line is no such easy matter. As she stumbled over one of the sleepers in the uncertain moonlight, he gave her his arm, and he felt her tremble all over as she looked at the ruins of the wrecked train. It was, in truth, a strange, weird scene in the cold moonlight, and Owen was much affected himself when he recollected all he had witnessed there. It was still enough now, but in a very short time hundreds of navvies were at work clearing away the *débris* and repairing the line, and by next evening trains ran over it as usual.

Owen pointed out to Gertrude where the farmhouse was to which he had carried Fidge. She wondered whether she ought to go to him, but her companion assured her he did not think it was necessary. He was well taken care of; besides, probably his father was with him by this time.

A train was drawn up, waiting for them and the other

passengers when they had passed the bit of damaged and impeded line. Aided by Owen, Gertrude scrambled up into it, and he took his seat in the corner furthest from hers. They had not talked very much since they had left Elmton, but now a heavy silence had fallen between them.

Gertrude's thoughts were too busy for words, yet she could not have said what they were about. They had been in a strange confusion all that journey, and would—as one's thoughts have a provoking way of doing in emergencies—now and then persistently dwell on some totally irrelevant subject. Little had she imagined, as she travelled up the line that morning with her mother, that she would be coming down alone with Owen Delmar, and yet at peace with him, her heart filled with a deep thankfulness, that left little room for anything else, that he was yet alive. She looked out of her window at the familiar hedgerows and meadows flying past in the moonlight, dreamily wondering whether she were the same girl who had watched them in the morning light such a short time ago.

Owen made no attempt to break the silence. He had found out that he had not come out of the accident quite so unscathed as he had originally imagined. His first thought, when he found himself alive and able to move, had been to do what he could for his fellow-sufferers, and in truth there was a great deal to be done. He had worked with all his strength and energy, and had not paused to think whether he had been hurt himself or not. But when the need for his exertions was over, he began to be aware of a somewhat severe pain in his side, besides sundry aches and bruises. Now, too, that his excitement was wearing off, pain, and the exhaustion after his exertions, and overwrought nerves, were beginning to tell on his highly-strung

temperament and never very robust constitution, and a deadly faintness was gradually stealing over him.

He had not meant his companion to know anything of this, but she happened to look round just as a sudden jolt caused him to put his hand to his side with a little gasp of pain.

'Oh, what is the matter?' she exclaimed.

'Nothing!' he answered, rather faintly. 'Only I find I hurt my side a little. It's not much.'

The feeble tone of his voice caused her to look more narrowly at him, and she started forward with a cry of dismay,—

'You—you aren't going to *faint!*' she exclaimed.

There was such an accent of terror in her voice, that, far gone as he was, Owen noticed it with amusement. A smile flickered over his white face as he answered,—

'I'll try not, Miss Digby.'

'Oh, please don't faint! I shouldn't know what to do if you did!' she implored. 'Is there nothing to be done?'

'Let down the window!' he gasped.

She let it down with a run, and a rush of cold air poured in. He lay back with closed eyes, letting it blow on his face, and it had the desired effect, for he did not actually lose consciousness. Perhaps, too, his amusement at Gertrude's alarm may have helped to restore him. She sat watching him with frightened eyes. She had not often been more alarmed. She could imagine nothing more awful than to be alone in a railway carriage with a fainting man. It would have been bad enough with another woman, but a man was infinitely worse. She had not the most distant idea what to do. All the remedies she had ever heard of seemed equally impracticable in this case.

Presently Owen opened his eyes for a moment, and assured her with a smile that he was not going to faint this time. She gave a sigh of relief, but all the same she was not at all sorry when she felt the train beginning to slacken speed for their own station.

Owen roused himself, and sat up.

'Here we are!' he said, in his natural voice. 'I am really very sorry to have been such a fool, Miss Digby.'

'I suppose you couldn't help it, but I was awfully frightened.'

'It was very stupid of me,' he said, smiling. 'But you needn't have been so alarmed. If I had fainted, I should probably have come to again, in course of time. Here we are at last!'

*At last*, it might well seem to him, who had run a good chance of never seeing the familiar little country station again. He looked at it in a curious, affectionate way as he stepped out on the platform and handed Gertrude out after him.

He asked if the station-master knew anything about Mr Mortimer, and learnt he had gone up the line in search of his son as soon as was possible, so that he felt confident the two Geoffreys were together by this time, though he had a terrible fear it might not be for long. Fidge had been so severely injured that he feared the worst.

'Is your carriage here?' he asked Gertrude, when he had told her about Mortimer.

'Yes, it is waiting for me. But how will you get home? You said they were not expecting you.'

'No. I am so thankful now I did not telegraph, or they might have been anxious, if they have heard of the accident. I meant to walk.'

'You can't possibly do that, and there is no conveyance to be had here but a shaky little cart. I will take you to Crane Court.'

'But it is miles out of your way!'

'That is of no consequence. Don't stand talking, but get in,' she replied, with decision.

Too weary to remonstrate any more, Owen obeyed her. Indeed, he felt he never would get home otherwise. With a shy movement, she threw the fur rug over him, and put the cushion Mrs Digby always used behind his back. He felt these small attentions well worth having, even at the cost of the pretty severe pain he was in. He was young, and very much in love, and she had never been kind to him before.

There was a soft woman's heart somewhere in Gertrude, though it was not easy to reach it, but it had been fairly touched to-night. She could not bear to feel that Owen was suffering, as she knew he must be, though he made no sign, with every jar and jolt of the carriage along the rough country road. She would far sooner have endured the pain herself. From which it may be inferred that she too was very much in love.

Their hands met once more as they parted at the door of Crane Court, and he thanked her in gentle tones for the lift, and then she was driven off alone in the darkness. She had a good cry before she reached home—the third that day. But she could not have told whether she was crying from over-excitement, or happiness, or grief.

It was very strange to Owen Delmar, after all he had experienced in the last few hours, to go in and find his people sitting quietly at dinner in the warm, well-lighted dining-room, with the Mortimer portraits on the walls,

as if nothing had happened; except that Maidie was half beside herself with anxiety about Fidge, little dreaming that her own dear brother had been in precisely the same danger.

They did not at once understand that Owen had been in the accident, though they knew he must have heard all about it on his journey. While he was trying to answer their questions, and Madeline was anxiously asking if he knew anything about Fidge, the member for Greatmills distinguished himself by quietly fainting away, as he had so nearly done in the railway carriage with Gertrude.

The doctor, who was speedily summoned, reported that he had broken two ribs, and been a good deal bruised and shaken, but that there was no cause for alarm. He ordered him to keep perfectly quiet for a few days—a command Owen was not at first disposed to disobey. So ended his holiday and his hunting.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

WE must return to Geoffrey Mortimer, whom we left hurrying across the moonlit fields to the farmhouse to which he had been directed, with a heart sick with dread. The farm belonged to a man named Boyce, who had married the daughter of an old tenant of his. Geoffrey knew this perfectly well, but he did not think of it now. What did it matter to him to whom the farmhouse belonged? There was but one thought in his mind. Every glimmer of hope had vanished since he left the scene of the accident. Who could the boy whom no one had claimed be but his son?

The back door of the farm stood wide open, and there was a light inside. He entered without knocking. The light came from the kitchen, the door of which was also open. There were two or three men in it, talking round the fire. Their conversation stopped when Mortimer walked in. Without looking at any one in particular, he said, in a low, hoarse voice,—

'I am told the dead bodies were brought here. I have come to look for my son, a little boy.'

One of the men by the fire had himself been in the accident. Another, Boyce, had been on the spot less than

ten minutes after it occurred. Yet both of them afterwards said they had witnessed nothing more pathetic than this young father, with his white face and haggard eyes, and that expression of horror, coming to look for the corpse of his little son.

Boyce went up to him and touched his arm.

'Your son is here, Mr Mortimer,' he said gently, 'but not where you expect to find him. He is alive, though badly hurt, I am afraid. A gentleman carried him down here. My wife is with him now.'

Mortimer reeled like a drunken man. Strong as he was, the sudden reaction, after his hours of awful anxiety and dread, was almost too much for him.

'Alive—here!' he gasped, repeating the two words that had entered into his brain. 'Take me to him!'

In another moment Geoffrey Mortimer was kneeling by the bedside of his only son, his whole soul one great burst of thankfulness that he had found him thus, and not as he dreaded, lifeless and mutilated. There were tears in the strong man's eyes as he laid his head for a moment on the pillow beside Fidge's curly one. The kind-hearted farmer's wife, who had known Mr Mortimer all her life, went away sobbing from sympathy.

Fidge's arm had just been set. The doctor came again to see him that night. Besides the broken arm, he had been very severely bruised and cut, and the doctor was extremely doubtful what the result of these injuries and the shock might be to so young a child. It was not long before Geoffrey learned it was possible he had only found his boy to lose him.

He was very anxious to get him home. The distance was only about ten miles by road, and Fidge was so small

he could easily he held in his father's arms all the way. He was only half-conscious, but the doctor thought the move might safely be made. So Mortimer made arrangements next day to take his child back to Craneham.

He had one sad duty to perform before he left the farm-house. He paid a last visit to poor faithful old Margaret. He felt very sad as he stood looking at those familiar, harsh features, now hushed in the awful stillness of death, and recalling what a true friend she had been ever since she first came to Crane Court with her fair young mistress. How would he and Fidge get on without her? But, perhaps, little Fidge would not have to do without her long. It was with a very weary, heart-sick sigh that Geoffrey turned away. He had a ghastly feeling at that moment that he was destined to live on and see everyone he cared for die around him. During the course of the day, he took Fidge home.

No mother could have nursed the child more devotedly and tenderly than he did. He was never away from Fidge's side, but he had very little hope. He had a terrible conviction that all his care would be useless, and if Fidge died, how could he bear it? Fidge was everything to him—all he had left. He had sacrificed so much for Fidge, and now his sacrifices would be all in vain. It was with a breaking heart that he listened, during the long hours, to the feeble moans and half-conscious babblings of his only son. He would never hear the old happy, merry voice again.

Madeline Delmar waited at Crane Court with intense anxiety for news of her little friend. She had heard from Owen of his serious injuries, and of Margaret's death, and she could think of nothing else. By the afternoon of the day following the accident she heard that Mr Mortimer

had brought his little son back to Ten Acre Farm. Servants were sent down at intervals to inquire, but they only brought such unsatisfactery reports, that Madeline could bear it no longer. On the next day again she sent a note to Geoffrey, entreating him to tell her all about Fidge, and imploring him to let her come down to the Farm if she could be any use at all.

Mortimer, keeping his weary watch, was much touched by this note. It was so kind, and withal so expressive of sincere affection for Fidge. The child was more conscious and restless that day, and seemed in more pain. He had repeatedly asked for Margaret, until Geoffrey had told him, not daring yet to let him know the truth, that Margaret had been hurt too, and could not come to him; and then he entreated for his Maidie darling. So Mortimer wrote a hurried pencil note in reply to Miss Delmar's—it was the first she had ever had from him—telling her that Fidge was very ill, and had been asking for her, and that it would be a great kindness if she would come and see him.

Madeline had just finished lunch when she received this note. She at once set off for the Farm, only too glad to be allowed to see her little favourite. From the window of his son's room Geoffrey saw her coming, and leaving the child for a moment with one of the maids, he went down to meet her. They had parted in dire anxiety at the station two days before—it was in scarcely diminished anxiety that they met again, and Madeline noticed that the Squire's face had never lost its drawn, haggard look, and that the last two days had traced innumerable lines about his mouth and eyes.

'How is he?' she asked, as their hands met.

'Very ill,' he answered. 'He is more conscious to-day, and has been asking for you.'

'Oh, Mr Mortimer, why didn't you send for me before?' she said reproachfully.

'I don't see how I could exactly "*send*" for you in that sort of way, Miss Delmar,' he answered apologetically. 'You mightn't have cared to come.'

'You know I would have come to Fidge if he wanted me at any time. It was unkind of you not to send for me at once!'

'Don't pitch into me, Miss Delmar,' he said, wearily. 'You see I have sent for you now. You will find him very ill indeed. He suffers so much, and the shock upset his nerves so terribly. He keeps on seeing and hearing it all over again.

'Poor little man. Owen told me his arm was broken. But, Mr Mortimer, he will soon be better, won't he?'

He shook his head, as he answered.

'I don't think so. I fear the worst. The doctor gives me very little hope. Sometimes I wonder if it would not have been better had he been killed outright, like Margaret, and spared this suffering.'

His tone was so strangely quiet that, for an instant, Madeline hardly realised what he meant. Then she gave a low cry.

'Oh, Mr Mortimer, no, not that! That's impossible! Fidge cannot *die!*' she exclaimed.

She had had very little to do with death in all her peaceful, prosperous life. It happened that she had never lost any near relation, or anyone she cared very much about. Owen had once been dangerously ill, but he had recovered. It seemed absolutely impossible to her that

little Fidge, Fidge who was so loved and cared for, should die. How could his father speak so calmly, if that were the case? Then she once more looked at Mortimer, and with a chill shudder recalled Tennyson's expression—'a calm despair.'

'I have very little hope,' he said sadly.

His experience had been the precise opposite to Madeline Delmar's. Though still young himself, he had seen so many die—death had so often come near to him—and he felt it was terribly, awfully possible he would lose his son too. He knew only too well the powerlessness of human love and care.

Madeline's hopefulness was beginning to reassert itself. She refused to believe the worst.

'While there is life, there is hope!' she said softly.

'I have heard that before,' Geoffrey answered bitterly.

She felt at once that he was thinking of the young wife he had lost so rapidly. With this memory, it was only natural he should feel despondent.

'Fidge is so young, and children have such marvellous vitality,' she said. 'May I see him now?'

'Yes, certainly,' he answered, leading the way into the flagged passage, and up the narrow, winding staircase. In spite of himself and reason he felt a little cheered by her hopeful words, and gentle sympathetic manner.

'Here is Miss Delmar kindly come to see you, old man,' he said softly.

Madeline saw a little white face and curly head on the pillow, a great pair of tired eyes gazing at her, and a small, feeble hand stretched out to her, while a weak little voice exclaimed,—

'My Maidie, darling, you have come at last!'

In a moment, forgetful of everything, she was on her knees by the bedside, the little hand caught in both hers, raining soft kisses on the white face.

'My dear little man!' she cried. 'Have you wanted me? Oh, Fidge, darling, I have wanted you too!'

'It does hurt so, my Maidie; it won't stop hurting—and I am so tired. Dad, hold me!'

With wonderful gentleness and deftness Mortimer wrapped the little figure in a shawl, and lifting Fidge up sat down with him in his arms. Experience had taught the Squire to be a good nurse. The child held out one hand to Madeline, and without hesitation she obeyed its summons, and came very close, so that she could hold it in her own, and smooth back the rough curls from his forehead.

'Are you so tired, Fidge?' she said softly. 'Can't you sleep?'

'No, my Maidie, it hurts too much, and if I do go to sleep, it all comes back again. Oh, it is so horrid!' He shuddered.

Madeline easily understood. Owen was experiencing a little of the same torment, but of course it was infinitely worse for a child. In the temporary unconsciousness of sleep, or rather, in the first confused moments of waking, all the awful, indescribable shock of the accident renewed itself.

She stayed, talking quietly and cheerfully, and her soft voice and gentle manner seemed to soothe Fidge and amuse him. Presently a message came that someone was waiting below to see Mortimer. Madeline suggested she would hold Fidge, who was always more restless and uncomfortable in bed, and Mortimer noticed the care and

tenderness with which she took him. Almost every touch except his own had hitherto hurt the child.

She succeeded in making him so comfortable, that Mortimer, coming up a little later, found he was not at all needed. He had numerous matters to attend to, and was glad to be able to leave Fidge for a little while safely. He had scarcely been out of the sick-room since he had returned to the Farm, and had thought of nothing but his small son.

When he went up again, Madeline held up a warning hand. Fidge was actually asleep—a sight that gladdened his father's heart. The doctor had said sleep was all important. Geoffrey began to think that after all a woman was a better nurse than a man. In which he did himself wrong—no woman could have nursed Fidge more skilfully than he had done. But Madeline had learnt something of nursing too, long ago in Owen's long illness. She had made a change to the little boy, and her gentle touch, and pleasant voice, and the soft pillow her sealskin coat had made, had soothed him so that he had fallen asleep in her arms, much to her triumph.

Mortimer came near, and stood looking down at him with inexpressible love and longing in his eyes. He whispered a hope that she was not tired, and she smiled a negative. Then she looked at the little face on her shoulder. Certainly it showed very drawn and pinched and white against the dark fur. She did not wonder at the heavy sigh with which Mortimer turned away, and busied himself over the fire.

Presently Fidge woke up with a low scream of terror, but Madeline held him close, and soothed him, and his panic soon subsided. The next thing was to persuade him

to take the beef-tea his father had ready for him. A great deal depended on his strength being kept up. Madeline united her persuasions to Geoffrey's,andbetween them he was induced to swallow about half the cup ; but she felt she did not much wonder at his distaste, for it did not look tempting. Her observant eyes noticed several things, and she made one or two mental notes.

In truth, Margaret was terribly missed. She had looked after everything at the Farm. Two girls had been under her being well trained, but as yet the one who acted as cook was quite incompetent to send up sick-room dishes nicely.

Madeline left soon after, promising Fidge she would come down next morning by half-past ten to take charge of him in the daytime. And Mortimer made no protests, for he saw how the child liked her being there. She could hardly bear to leave him as it was, so acutely did she realise his danger. Poor little Fidge! She felt she would be sadder all her life if he died. But what could her grief be compared to his father's? She knew Geoffrey Mortimer would never get over it, and the thought of this bitter sorrow that seemed only too near him made her heart very sad for his sake.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

HAD the Squire and his son still been living at Crane Court, more interest could hardly have been evinced in that household in the latter's welfare. Fidge had fascinated all the Delmars just as he had fascinated Madeline. Mrs Delmar could have cried over the little motherless boy's sufferings and danger. Mr Delmar was most anxious to hear all about him, and looked very sad at Maidie's account; and Owen, when she went to see him, talked of nothing else, and was quite ready to sympathise with her trouble and anxiety.

'I have said I would go down to-morrow!' she said. 'You don't want me, Owen, do you?'

'No, I only want to be left in peace!' he replied, with brotherly frankness. 'Besides, I've lots of people to look after me, and I'm really all right. Poor little chappie, I daresay he's glad to have you. I'll come to see him as soon as I am about.'

'Oh, Owen, if only—' Her voice broke.

'I know, Maidie; but don't be frightened. He'll pull through—I know he will. He's alive now, and it happened two days ago, and that's a great thing.'

Punctually—for she knew Fidge would be expecting her—Madeline went down to Ten Acre Farm next morn-

ing, armed with a basket. Mortimer met her in the passage to tell her Fidge was decidedly better. He had passed a quieter night, and had had a good sleep. The doctor, who had been early, gave a much better account of him.

Glad tears sprang to the girl's eyes.

'He will get well, now, Mr Mortimer!'

He looked down at her with a smile.

'Ah, yes! I hope so, now!' he answered.

'Oh, I am so happy! He must, he shall get well, and soon, too! Now I have come to take charge of him to-day, if you will trust me.'

'Rather! I think I shall take advantage of your being with him to go over the farm. I really must look at my sheep.'

'Of course. I wonder they are alive. They haven't been "looked at" for three days, and being "looked at" always seems a necessity of a sheep's existence!' said Madeline, and then they both laughed, as they could not possibly have laughed the previous day. Not that there was anything much to laugh at, but they both felt so relieved.

But before Mortimer reached his sheepfold, indeed not many yards from his house, he met Aaron Futcher, who, touching his hat, stopped him to ask how Master Fidge was.

'They do zay he be tur'ble bad,' he said. 'The missis and me be tur'ble vexed about 'un. Us do hope he be better, zur!'

'Thanks, Aaron; yes, he really is better to-day, I am glad to say. Miss Delmar is with him now, or I could not have left him,' answered the Squire.

'Thank ee, zur. The missis she will be pleased to hear he is better. 'Twarn't till late that night we heard of the accident, and that the little master was in it, and the missis she was that vexed about it. "Whatever will the Squire do if the little measter be hurt?" she sez.' And touching his hat again, Futcher strode off.

His were not the only expressions of sympathy Mortimer met with during his walk that morning. Not one of the farm labourers but asked after little Fidge, who they all knew well enough as he came among them with his father on his shaggy pony. They knew, too, a little of the Squire's great love for his small son, and, like Mrs Futcher, when they had heard of his accident, they had wondered what Mr Mortimer would do.

Meantime, Madeline Delmar had gone up to the sick-room, where she found Fidge eagerly expecting her. He certainly looked better this morning, and seemed more like himself. He was far less restless and feverish, and she felt with a glad thankfulness that he was going to recover after all.

She was quite busy that morning. She began by giving the room a regular tidying, aided by Prudence, one of the maids. It was not before it was needed, but Mr Mortimer had probably considered such an operation superfluous. Besides, Fidge had been too ill, hitherto, to be disturbed. Now he was well enough to be amused at the proceedings of Prudence and his 'darling Maidie.'

Next, she brought her basket to the bedside, and began unpacking it where the child could see her. It contained all sorts of delicacies for him—clear beef-tea with no suspicion of grease, jelly like amber, sponge cakes as light as a feather, and hothouse grapes. Madeline did not feel at all sure how Mr Mortimer would like all this importation,

but she determined to brave him. Pride or no pride, little Fidge must have what he required, so long as Crane Court could produce it.

Directed by him, she made an expedition downstairs to the kitchen, in order to ingratiate herself with the young cook, and give over to her what she had brought from the Court. She found the girl only too delighted—the cares of providing anything Master Fidge would eat were taken off her mind. In masculine style, her master had grumbled at her efforts, without helping her to improve them. It was astonishing how at sea the establishment seemed without Margaret.

'Are you in much pain?' Madeline asked Fidge, when she returned to him.

'Not so much to-day, my Maidie,' he answered. 'But you know it has hurt dreadfully, and I couldn't help crying sometimes.'

'I should think not, my poor little man! I am sure I should have cried with far less to bear.'

'I don't expect you would, because you're grown-up, and grown-up people never do cry. I tried not to, because you know Mortimers never make a fuss when they're hurt.'

Madeline smiled.

'Don't they? Perhaps they do when they're little, though.'

But Fidge shook his head.

'I don't think they ever do, and so I try not to. But you see you don't know, because you're not a Mortimer.'

Madeline laughed outright at the sweeping contempt of Fidge's tone. Half to tease him, she said,—

'But I shall be when you marry me.'

He looked puzzled. Perhaps he had a dim notion,

learnt from poor Margaret's tuition, that a Delmar and a Mortimer were widely different things.

'Yes, I suppose you will be then,' he said thoughtfully. 'But I don't think it's quite the same thing. I'll ask Dad.'

'Tell me, did Dad sit up with you last night, Fidge?'

'Oh yes, my Maidie. He is always with me when you aren't. I went to sleep for quite a long time when he held me once.'

'Fidge, do you know you have a very good Dad?'

'Why, of course I have—the jolliest Dad in the whole world. Don't you remember we settled that a long time ago. At least, I think you said you thought your Dad very jolly too. I suppose people always like their own best.'

Perhaps Madeline did not feel absolutely certain this was the case. Anyhow, she did not enter upon the subject, but said,—

'Both my father and mother sent you their love, and so did Owen. He is so sorry you are ill, and he would come to see you, only you know he was hurt too.'

'In the accident! Was he, Maidie? As much as me?'

'No, not as much as you, my little man. He did not know he was hurt at all at the time, but he found out he was afterwards, a good deal, but not so badly as you were.'

Fidge was deeply interested to find he had a fellow-sufferer in 'Mr O.o.,' and not displeased, child-like, that his own injuries were the more severe.

Altogether, the morning passed quickly away. About one o'clock Mr Mortimer returned, his thick shooting-boots showing traces that he had made use of his liberty to go over his farm. He looked pleased to find his son so well and bright.

'I think Miss Delmar is a most successful nurse,' he

said. 'But now, Fidge, I expect we must let her go. She will barely get home in time for lunch as it is.'

But Madeline had not intended this at all.

'I—I meant to stay here all day, if you don't mind,' she said. 'Won't you give me lunch, Mr Mortimer?'

An absolutely panic-stricken look crossed Mortimer's face. He had not the faintest idea what state his commissariat might have fallen into without Margaret. Since the accident, he had thought of nothing but Fidge. And he had a vivid recollection of the table at Crane Court.

'Certainly; I shall be delighted,' he said, 'only I am not at all sure whether there is any lunch!'

'Oh, I've no doubt there's something!' she answered carelessly.

It's extremely possible there's nothing,' he said gravely. 'Indeed I'm not joking.'

'There is sure to be bread and butter, and I sha'n't starve on that,' she replied, laughing at his dismay.

'Yes, there will be that, I hope, he said, smiling a little. 'Shall we come down; I expect it is ready now; and I can give Fidge his dinner afterwards. How did he get on with his lunch?' added Mr Mortimer, as he opened the door.

'Oh, Dad,' called out Fidge, 'I had a lovely lunch. Maidie has brought down jelly, and grapes, and all sorts of nice things, quite different to Martha's, from the Court.'

The cat was out of the bag. Madeline saw the Squire colour, and dart a reproachful look at her, and his lips moved as if he were about to speak. She did not wait to hear what he said, but plunged down the dark, narrow staircase, along the flagged passage, into the sitting-room, where she awaited him in no small trepidation.

She did not mean to give way, but she was still a good deal alarmed at the stately Squire.

She employed herself till he joined her by looking at the portrait of his wife. It had a strange fascination for her. She felt that dead girl stood so hopelessly between her and her happiness. Had the face been a less fair one, she might have felt more hopeful, but she told herself that to have loved, and been loved, by the owner of that cloudy hair, those great brown eyes, that sweet, childish face. might well be all a man could need for a life-time, Madeline was, as we know, singularly free from conceit, or she might have argued that this woman had been dead for years, that she herself was no less fair, that Mr Mortimer saw a good deal of her, and that he must be blind indeed if he did not fall in love with her.

'Miss Delmar,' he said, coming into the room, 'is what Fidge said true?'

'Oh, don't let us talk about it!'

'But I must. Why should you give us all sorts of things?'

Madeline screwed up her courage, and interrupted him.

'Now, Mr Mortimer, that's not at all the right way to put it. Fidge is ill, and therefore dainty, and it is very important he should take nourishment. You are suddenly deprived of Margaret, and your cook does not understand these little sick-room things, but our's does, so what is more natural than that I should bring them down from the Court. You may say what you like, but I mean to do it,' she went on, waxing warm. 'Your absurd pride must not stand in Fidge's way.'

The Squire looked somewhat astonished, as well he might, at this emphatic speech from gentle Madeline Delmar.

'I am sure I'm not proud,' he said mildly.

'Not proud! Why, you are the very proudest man I ever met!'

'No, I'm not proud *now*, if I ever was.'

'I expect you are far prouder now than you ever were, on the contrary. But never mind; it's not for you,—only for Fidge, you know.'

Mortimer saw the advisability of submitting, much as he disliked it.

'It is very kind of you—' he began, in his stately manner, but she again interrupted him.

'Now don't thank me. I know you hate it, and you may say so as much as you like, only I mean to do it all the same. And—another thing. Mother and I have settled that Parker—you know Parker, mother's maid who she has had years, and who is a capital nurse—is to come down here to-night, and sit up with Fidge, so that you may have a good night's rest.'

'Oh, but I can manage all right—'

'No, you can't; you will get knocked up, for no one can exist without sleep, and then what is to become of Fidge? I assure you it's only for his sake!' she answered, laughing.

She had noted the dark lines under his eyes, and the weariness of his movements, and she knew he was more worn out than he was probably aware of himself.

'Anything more, Miss Delmar?' asked Geoffrey meekly.

'No, nothing more just at present, I think.'

'Then shall we begin lunch? You see there really is none,' he added sadly.

Madeline took her seat at the table. On it was a large ham, a loaf, some butter, a cheese, and some baked potatoes.

'I don't know how much you mean to eat,' she said, laughing, 'but I think I sha'n't starve at present.'

'But perhaps you don't like ham.'

'It so happens I do, very much, Mr Mortimer, and baked potatoes still better.'

Geoffrey cleared a chair for himself by turning all its contents on the floor, and seated himself at the table.

'I don't know how it is, but this room is always in a mess,' he said. 'Now it seems more so than usual.'

But perhaps it was Miss Delmar's presence that made the mess more apparent.

'How you must miss Margaret, Mr Mortimer.'

'I do. How on earth we are to get on without her remains to be proved. I can't say I see the way at present,' he answered helplessly. 'Poor old Margaret! she is to be buried to-morrow. To show I am not proud, I am going to ask you if you could spare a few white flowers?'

'Yes, certainly; I will send them.'

The lunch went off very well. Some excellent cherry jam was produced, for which Madeline had a great weakness, and she could only hope Mr Mortimer was convinced she was not starved, by the quantity of it and bread she ate. The Squire and she found plenty to say to each other—their common anxiety had drawn them very near together. In his own house he quite dropped the stately manner that always alarmed Madeline so much, and she discovered in him more and more the 'Dad' of Fidge's adoration. He, too, was unconsciously enjoying her society.

As a matter of fact, circumstances, and not temperament, had condemned Geoffrey Mortimer to a solitary life. Few men were more naturally constituted to appreciate congenial society than he was. Great, therefore, must have

been the love for his young wife that had kept him unswervingly faithful to her memory so long.

He was too physically and mentally tired to think very much about it, or analyse why it gave him such a pleasant sensation to see Madeline Delmar sitting at his table, looking quite at home. He gazed at her once for quite a long time, vaguely pondering it over, but before he arrived at any solution, she looked up, and, blushing to find his eyes fixed on her, laughingly asked if he were wondering how much more bread and jam she intended to eat.

Probably our readers have already put down Geoffrey Mortimer as the very blindest dolt who ever lost a supreme blessing for want of taking the trouble to stretch out his hand to secure it. But it must be remembered that he had never dreamed it was possible he could care for anyone as he had once loved Nellie, and that, thanks to faithful Margaret, he had not hitherto seriously felt the need of a mistress of his house.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

MADELINE stayed with Fidge that afternoon, most of which he spent sleeping peacefully, his hand in hers, while his father again attended to his business. She went home in good time for tea, leaving Fidge happy by having promised to come down next day. He had at first been a little dismayed when she told him Mrs Parker was to be with him that night instead of Dad, but when she explained why, he submitted cheerfully.

So each day Madeline went down to the Farm in the morning, and stayed there all day, lunching with Mr Mortimer. Having fully described one day, it is not our intention to detail each. Fidge grew rapidly better, having once made a start in the right direction, and soon was more in need of amusement than anything else. Madeline never wearied of reading to him, and telling him stories, and playing with him.

The second day she was at the Farm she was glad to see Mr Mortimer looked a different man for his night's rest. The worn look had left his face, and he was far brighter and more cheerful. No wonder, for his awful dread and terror about his son were at an end, and in their place a great happiness filled his heart.

It was not particularly good for Madeline's peace of mind that she should be thus constantly thrown in contact

with the man she loved so dearly and so hopelessly. But she did not mind this. There was no element of excitement about her love, for she never indulged in the faintest shadow of hope. This being the case, she could be content to see Mr Mortimer, and to be his friend, without suffering very keenly.

She felt they were fast becoming great friends. She was getting over her fear of him, and she ventured to laugh at him a good deal, and he could never be grateful enough for her kindness to his small son. There was the one great bond between them—little Fidge. And, as has been remarked, it was exceedingly pleasant to him to have her about the house, brightening and refining it by her graceful, quiet ways and sweet voice. What would poor Margaret have said could she have foreseen a Delmar would be on such terms in the household?

Not that Madeline herself was the least likely to forget the distance she had always felt separated a Delmar from a Mortimer. One day at lunch, when she and Geoffrey had been laughing and talking in a very friendly way, she happened to say, without thinking—the conversation had turned on shooting,—

'Yes, I think it must be so horrid for you to feel you can't shoot your own coverts now. Don't you hate it?'

But with his most distantly courteous manner, the Squire responded,—

'Not at all. Of course I am well aware they are Mr Delmar's.'

Madeline felt crushed, but she rebelled.

'I suppose I ought not to have said that,' she said. 'But I wish you would not annihilate me by putting on that very grand air. I used to think you were never without it.'

'You talk as if I gave myself airs, Miss Delmar,' he answered, laughing a little, in spite of himself.

'No, I don't think you *give* yourself airs, for I believe they are natural. They were born in you, with the Mortimer blood, I expect, but, all the same, they are very alarming.'

'Miss Delmar, you can't mean to say that you are ever alarmed at *me?*'

'Often, Mr Mortimer. I can't imagine how Fidge manages to be so little afraid of you, for you are a most alarming person, you know.'

Geoffrey laughed outright. Then he saw she was perfectly serious.

'That is quite a new idea to me,' he said. 'What is there alarming about me?'

'I don't quite know,' she answered thoughtfully. 'But I think it is partly that you are so very proud, one is afraid of saying something you don't like.'

Mortimer paused a moment, and then said impetuously,—

'I am a great fool.'

'No,' she replied earnestly. 'You can't help it. And I know we—Papa and all of us—must often say things that hurt you. But, Mr Mortimer, we don't mean it, you know. You must remember we are different to you.'

Geoffrey could not but understand what she meant. He was vexed that he should have shown he minded Mr Delmar's tactless speeches. He could not guess that Madeline had divined his feelings with the insight born of love.

'You, at any rate, have never hurt me,' he said gently. 'I know I must be an idiot to be hurt at all, but I think poverty and exile from Crane Court have made me touchy.'

'I don't think you are that. And oh, Mr Mortimer,'

she exclaimed, 'don't be angry with me if I say—what I'll never mention again—that we are so sorry for you—Owen and I—that you can't live in that dear old house! We know the sight of such people as we there must be hateful to you—and no wonder.'

Mortimer was not angry—her sympathy was too genuine. But he was a little startled that she should show herself so well aware of his sentiments. He only said simply,—

'You know Crane Court was never let before, so I have not become accustomed to it yet.'

They did not discuss the matter any further then, but Madeline felt that a great barrier had been broken down between them, and that their friendship—be it remembered she aspired to nothing more—was much more real after this.

Meantime Owen, after keeping quiet for a few days, had re-appeared downstairs. The doctor said he would feel his side, and the other effects of the accident, for some time, and it was evident he did; but he made nothing of it, and declared himself to be perfectly well. He announced that if he thought it was necessary, or if he received the mildest of whips, he would return to London and his parliamentary duties at once.

'If you are so extremely well, you had better come with us to the Eastanley Castle ball next week,' said Madeline to him laughingly one day.

'If I am still down in these parts then, I don't mind if I do,' he replied.

Madeline looked at him in amazement. Not only did she consider him in no ball-going condition yet, but, as a rule, he declared he detested country dances. No faintest suspicion that he might have an 'attraction' ever crossed her mind.

She had just returned from the Farm, and was still in her hat and coat. They were in the library, and she was standing by the fire. He was lying back, supported by cushions, in one of the big library chairs, looking very pale and hollow-eyed, with a book on his knee.

'How are the two Geoffreys?' he asked.

'Fidge is much better, I am glad to say. He is fast getting well. If you don't take care, he will catch you up.'

'I am all right now. Poor little fellow, I must come to see him soon. And his father?'

'Quite well, I presume,' she answered shortly.

'And, of course, fast learning to depend upon you as his guide, philosopher, and friend. He had much better engage you as a permanency down there. You seem to get on so well.'

'What nonsense you talk, Owen!' she answered, turning away to hide the hot colour that flooded her face. 'Fidge and I were always great friends, and I am very glad to be able to help to amuse him, poor little man!'

'There's nothing like starting a great friendship with the son of a good-looking young widower,' said Owen, with his mocking laugh. 'Upon my word, I am not at all sure it is correct for you to be going down to the Farm every day like this!'

'Owen, how can you talk such rubbish!' exclaimed Maidie angrily, preparing to go away, and so put a stop to her brother's teasing.

But carriage wheels were heard, and Owen remarked,—

'I wonder who that is!'

'Probably mother returning from her drive.'

'If your ideas were not all centred on the Farm, you

would know she had her drive this morning. It must be a caller.'

'Excitement—a caller in the country!' said Maidie, going to a window from which a view of the front door could be obtained. 'It's Mrs Digby and Gertrude—come to tea, I suppose. I must go. Surely you aren't coming? I thought you hated callers.' For Owen was slowly getting out of his chair.

'So I do, as a rule. But if they will come at tea-time, I don't see why I am to have cold tea in consequence,' he replied coolly.

'Shall I send you in a cup here? They will only tire you.'

'No, no; I'll come. I rather want to thank Miss Digby for giving me a lift home that evening.'

Since they had parted in the half dark at the Crane Court door that night, Owen Delmar and Gertrude Digby had heard nothing of each other, except that a report of his injuries had reached Daltons. The Digbys had not hitherto thought it necessary to inquire after him, but their object in calling this afternoon had partly been to find out how he was.

But it may readily be imagined that the two young people had thought a good deal about each other during the time that had elapsed since their parting that eventful day. And Gertrude, though she scorned to display the smallest interest, would have given much to know how he was. But as she approached Crane Court, she resolved she would be as disagreeable, or more disagreeable to him than ever, if she chanced to see him, to make up for her amiability that evening. So that, if he expected to take her up at all where he left her off, he was immensely mistaken.

The afternoon was already closing in, and the drawing-room was lighted quite as much by a blazing fire as by the grey light outside. Gertrude Digby was looking her best by the firelight, in her well-fitting dark winter coat, and neat little hat, the red gleams playing on her beautiful hair and delicate complexion. She had not expected to see Owen Delmar, and she gave a little defiant toss of her head as he followed Madeline into the room.

Mrs Digby was just making inquiries concerning him of Mrs Delmar.

'I am glad to see you are about and able to answer for yourself,' she said, as he shook hands with her.

'Oh, I am all right!' he answered. 'I only wish everyone had got off as easily as I did,' and he turned the conversation into another channel.

But it was not many minutes before he found his way to Gertie's side. She did not even turn her head to look at him, but continued her conversation with Madeline, until the latter moved away to the tea-table. Then he spoke—he had been looking with pleasure before at the lovely lights on her hair.

'I hope you were none the worse of your experiences last week, Miss Digby?'

'I—oh no! you see, I have survived them. All the same'—she spoke meaningly—'I should not care to repeat some of them.'

'You mean the journey home with me,' he answered, reading her thoughts and putting them into words, as of yore.

'Precisely. It would have been unpleasant enough under any circumstances, but you made it worse by frightening me so.'

'That was unwarrantable, I allow. How is your horse? Better, I hope?'

Gertrude observed he remembered her hunter was lame, which showed his interest in her was undiminished, though subsequent events might well have put all she said to him at Elmton Station out of his head. But she did not permit herself to soften towards him.

'He is still lame,' she answered shortly.

'I am so sorry. I know you must hate having nothing to ride.'

Her only answer was to dart an angry look at him, to show she disliked his sympathy. Owen felt inclined to laugh. Believing himself to be aware of her real feelings for him, there was something absurd in this pretended disdain. And yet it was rather annoying, too.

He brought her some tea.

'Though I am not sure whether you will take it now I have brought it!' he said laughingly.

'I expect you have poisoned it. I should like it much better if you hadn't touched it.'

'Well, I have only touched the saucer. Maidie, bring over another cup of tea for Miss Digby—she thinks this one is contaminated. Also the bread and butter—she probably won't touch that if I hand it.'

Madeline did as she was told, feeling much amused, especially as Gertrude was looking quite serious, with an angry flush on her cheeks. Owen, too, was serious, but there was laughter in his eyes. Altogether, they sparred as much as usual, and Owen had no opportunity of finding out whether her manner was, as he imagined, merely a disguise. He almost began to regret that he had not struck when the iron was hot, and proposed to her in the

train after the accident. He determined more firmly than ever to go to the Eastanley Castle ball, if possible.

The conversation happened to turn to this projected festivity.

'I suppose you won't be there!' said Gertrude to him, in a tone which sounded as if she hoped he would not. She had never asked how he was, or betrayed that she recollected he had been ill, but she had not failed to notice his pallor, and the deliberation of his movements, and it hurt her, as it had hurt her the night of the accident, to feel he was suffering. She had never felt this with regard to anyone before, and she resented the feeling, for it showed her what she hated to know, how much she cared for him.

'On the contrary,' he answered, 'I hope to be there, unless I am obliged to be in London. I know it is a blow to you.'

'Yes, I did hope to be quit of you for that one evening!' she replied, rising to accompany her mother, who was taking leave of Mrs Delmar. She merely bowed to Owen, who made no attempt to shake hands with her. He was half amused, half vexed, to find they had so completely returned to their old terms towards each other. Well, if he possibly could, he would get her to himself at the ball, and then— Owen returned to his quiet nook in the library, feeling he would give half his fortune just to hear Gertie Digby say she loved him.

Gertrude was generally pretty vehement in her abuse of the Delmars, yet when, as they drove home, her mother made some comment disparaging them, she defended them quite warmly, and almost went to the length of denying that they were vulgar at all. But she was silent when Mrs Digby somewhat condescendingly remarked that it was

wonderful how nice the children were. She was asking herself yet once more the question whether, if Owen Delmar again asked her to marry him—which was not likely, after the way she had treated him—she could possibly consent to do so. It would be an awful thing to marry a Delmar, for nothing could ever gloss over the fact that his father was purse-proud and loud-voiced, and that his mother now and then misplaced an aspirate.

Yet Gertrude was not quite sure she would be able to refuse Owen. He was getting more power over her each time they met. She felt this with a spasm of fear curiously mixed with a throb of joy. As in a vision, self-willed, imperious little Gertie saw how sweet it would be to yield herself up, with no further struggle, to a stronger will that her own, and to fight no longer against a love she could not overcome.