CHAPTER XXIX.

MADELINE held her own manfully, and went down to the Farm as usual next day, in spite of Owen's chaff. If there was anything at all unusual in her doing so, it certainly never struck either her good-natured, easy-going mother, or Geoffrey Mortimer himself. The latter, indeed, probably considered himself more in the light of a chaperon than an object of danger. He only thought it most extremely kind of Miss Delmar to take so much trouble about Fidge.

Madeline, now she knew him better, was a good deal amused at his habit of regarding himself as quite an elderly man. She had no idea what his age actually was, but she knew he could not possibly be as old as he made himself out to be. Without the smallest affectation, but quite as a matter of course, he talked as if he were at least a contemporary of Mr Digby's.

'Are you going to this grand ball at Eastanley Castle?' she asked him at lunch. 'I see you have an invitation.' For it was stuck up on the chimney-piece, in masculine fashion.

'I can't imagine why they sent me a card,' he answered. 'I never go to balls.'

'Why not?'

He looked amazed at her question, and replied,—

'Why what should I go for? I have no one to take.'

'You would take yourself, and I suppose you would go for the same reason as other people—to see your friends, and dance.'

Mortimer looked amused.

'My dancing days were over long ago.'

'Really, Mr Mortimer, you talk as if you were Methuselah. Are you too infirm to dance, may I inquire?' she asked sarcastically.

He laughed merrily.

'No, I'm not very infirm yet,' he answered. 'But I am old—too old to go to dances on my own account.'

'You know that's absurd. One of these days you will discover you are not as old as you imagine. You had better go to that ball. We meditate having a little dance, before Lent—you will have to come to that?'

After lunch Madeline went up to Fidge as usual. He was up and half-dressed now, and would be down in a day or two, but of course his arm would be useless for a long time. He had quite recovered his spirits, and was as merry and talkative as ever, but his sweet little face was rather pale, all the more so that he had quite lost his summer sun-burn.

He was in a conversational mood this afternoon.

'My Maidie,' he said, making her sit down on the couch beside him, and nestling close up to her in his loving little way, 'my Maidie, do you know you have been such a long time having lunch to-day. Were you eating a great lot, or were you talking to Dad?'

'Some of both, Fidge, I think,' she answered, playing with his sunny curls.

'Don't you *love* Dad? Isn't he a darling?' asked the child; an innocent question which brought the hot colour to Madeline's cheek, and made her thankful she was alone with the boy.

'He is very good,' she answered diplomatically. But how heartily she could have replied to Fidge's question in the affirmative. The child's love for his father could be nothing to hers for the man who seemed so far above other men.

'Dad and I were talking last night,' said Fidge, taking possession of one of her hands and playing with it. 'I asked him why your father is so much richer than we are. Dad said it was because he was clever, and worked hard.'

'Yes, Fidge, that was why. You sometimes say you want to be rich—perhaps you will be able to make money if you work hard when you are grown up.'

'I want to be a soldier. Lots of Mortimers have been soldiers. Dad would have been, only his father died, and he had to stop at home, and take care of Crane Court. Do soldiers often get rich?'

'Not very often, I am afraid, my little man.'

'Not even when they are generals? My great-grandfather—his picture is in the library—was a general. He was in the battle of Waterloo. He was made a knight—Sir William Mortimer. But Dad says it's nothing being a knight nowadays, 'cos all sorts of funny people are.'

'Does Dad say you are to go into the Army?' asked Maidie, secretly wondering whether Mortimer traditions would still prevail, in spite of the obvious inducements for the youngest bearer of the name to adopt a more lucrative profession.

'Dad wouldn't promise,' answered Fidge. 'But he says

I shall, if he can possibly manage it. But he says we're so beastly poor'—Maidie had a suspicion that this expression had in truth been Mortimer's—'that if things get worse instead of better, he doesn't know what will happen by that time. But I think he'd *like* me to be a soldier.'

After this Fidge went to sleep; he had not yet given up his afternoon nap. He slept soundly for more than an hour. There was now no fear of his waking in a panic, and Madeline slipped out, and, taking advantage of Mr Mortimer being out of the house, employed herself by tidying a little in the 'parlour,' as the Farm sitting-room was called. She had done this before, but so judiciously that the Squire never discovered who had been at work, but only noticed with pleasure the comparative order and neatness. He was a man who liked to see a room tidy, though he had no idea how to keep it so.

The position she had insensibly assumed at the Farm amused Maidie. She was completely at home there by now, and the two servants often came to her for orders when their master was out. Even when he was in, he sometimes referred them to her. She was very happy, for in that little household, now that Fidge was ill, she felt she was both useful and needed.

Fidge was still asleep when she returned to his room. She took her knitting, and sat down by him. No mother could have looked with more love than she did at the little curly head and pale face on the cushions. As we know, she had begun to love Fidge for his own sake, but now she loved him equally for his father's. On him she could lavish all the affection she could not display to Mr Mortimer. It was the old story. Everything belonging to the beloved one was invested with peculiar interest.

Since the world began there has been no surer proof of love than this. There is a good deal of meaning in the old proverb, 'Love me, love my dog.' If you love me, you will love my dog simply because he is mine, however objectionable a cur otherwise.

Just as Fidge woke, Geoffrey Mortimer came in. The child insisted on his father's holding him, more for amusement now than because he needed the support. There was a big, comfortable, shabby arm-chair in the room, discarded from Crane Court when the house had been set in order for the Delmars, and in this Geoffrey settled himself, with his boy nestling in his arms. Madeline liked to see them so, for it made a pretty picture, but at the same time she never did so without experiencing that odd little jealous feeling that had assailed her long ago. They had all they needed in each other.

She sat and chatted to them a few minutes, a laughing, nonsensical conversation, in which it would be hard to say who talked most nonsense of the three. A month ago, she would not have given Mortimer credit for being so full of fun. Then she rose to go.

'Good-bye, my Maidie!' cried Fidge, holding out his hand to her. He pulled her towards him till he could kiss her, and as he was in his father's arms, her head and Geoffrey's were very close together. Fidge took advantage of this circumstance to remark, as he kissed her, 'You're a darling, my Maidie. Dad, why don't you kiss her?'

Mortimer saw the fair face only a few inches from his own colour hotly at this suggestion. There was nothing for it but to laugh, which Maidie did very uncomfortably, as she started back, almost as hastily as if she feared he were going to comply with Fidge's suggestion. Without

venturing to look at him, she ran off speedily, and she was nearly at Crane Court before her cheeks resumed their usual tone of colour. Little Fidge was a darling, but what could make him say such terrible things?

Meanwhile, Geoffrey Mortimer had come to one of those crises in a man's life which often arise most unexpectedly. When Fidge suggested he should kiss Madeline Delmar, whose face had been so conveniently close to his own, and who had looked so extremely lovely in her confusion, he had been seized with an unexpected desire to do so. And with this desire came the knowledge, dazzling and surprising, that he was very much in love. All this time he had imagined he never had cared, or never would care, for anyone but his dead wife, and now all of a sudden he discovered he was still a young man, and capable of falling very much in love.

He sat still with Fidge, who was quiescent for once in his life, in his arms, trying to realise what had happened to him. He had been in love before, and he knew very well what love was like, so he could not possibly be mistaken now. He loved Madeline Delmar—he was not at all sure, in the new blaze of light that had been shed on him, whether he had not been in love with her some time, perhaps ever since that Christmas children's party at Crane Court, when he had gone up in the snow to fetch Fidge.

It was very perplexing, but, withal, not unpleasant, to find that he was still young, and, as he termed it to himself, foolish after all. Of course, other people would have told him that what had come to him was only natural, and, indeed, inevitable. It was exceedingly improbable that, left a widower before most men are married, he should have remained alone all his life. But he had imagined any such

thing as love was over long ago for him, instead of which it was only dormant, and waiting to be called into life again.

There had never been anything in the least degree morbid or sentimental in his nature, and now he did not torment himself one instant with doubts whether he was unfaithful to Nellie's memory. He had loved her dearly and truly, as much as a man could love a woman. No other love could ever obliterate or supplant that old one. To the end of time he would always think of her as his first love, and his worshipped wife. But she had been dead seven years, and this new love had nothing to do with that old one. He found there was plenty of room in his life for both.

He could have laughed aloud with happiness in those first few minutes. He did not consider whether Miss Delmar was a possible match for him, or whether there was any probability of her returning his affection. Reflections such as these came later. No inexperienced youth could have been more amazed at finding himself in love than was Geoffrey Mortimer, and at present he had no leisure for other considerations. It may be doubted whether he even realised the fact that he contemplated a second marriage. He only felt that he was intensely in love with Madeline Delmar, and that life held undreamed-of possibilities of happiness for him again.

Presently he left Fidge with Prudence, and went out. He had no definite purpose in so doing, only, like many country-bred men, accustomed to be much in the open air, he could think more comfortably out of doors than in. He leant over the little gate in the paling that divided the strip of front garden from the field, and stood dreaming as he had not dreamed for many a long year.

It was a mild evening, with a soft southerly wind blow-

ing. The moon was high in the sky, and showed fitfully between the undefined grey clouds, which were still edged with gold towards the west. The moonlight was reflected by numberless small puddles and ponds, for February Filldyke had not belied its name that year, and the air was full of moisture, rising from the soft, damp earth. The trees and hedges showed their delicate tracery of bare branches, moving ever so little in the wind. The hazels were tasselled with catkins, and here and there by daylight in sheltered nooks could be found fresh, tender green leaves, and even a starry eclandine blossom. There was just a faint breath, a whispered promise, of spring in the air, which was in perfect accordance with Geoffrey Mortimer's mood. Perhaps he felt it, for his face was very serene as he looked up at the sky, but he certainly did not realise it, for there was little of the artist, and less of the poet, in his practical, simple nature.

It was very quiet. Had it been summer, the breeze would have rustled among innumerable leaves, but now it made no sound in the bare boughs. He could just hear Fidge prattling to Prudence, and still louder came the noises made by the beasts in the farmyard, and old Jethro moving about finishing his day's work. Far off came the roar of a train, heard with a clearness that foretold more rain. It was wet enough already, and horribly bad for the lambs, but it was not of his lambs that Mortimer was thinking this evening, though the fold was not far off, and a bleat was now and then distinguishable.

He was dreaming, indistinctly and vaguely, as all lovers have done, from the days of Jacob and Rachel, of the woman he loved, and picturing her to himself in all her delicate grace and beauty, and recalling the soft sweet-

ness of her voice. He had been blind hitherto, but he was so no longer. Half audibly he murmured to himself Fidge's pet name for her, 'my Maidie darling,' and it sounded very pleasant from his own lips.

She was worthy of all love and worship, this beautiful girl who had been so wonderfully good and kind to his child, so friendly to himself. How happy a man would be if he could call her wife, and spend the rest of his days in her companionship. Geoffrey stood leaning over the gate, his eyes resting on the familiar scene around him, partially revealed by the fitful moonlight, dreaming sweet dreams of what such a life might be.

One often hears of men becoming centuries old in a few moments. Geoffrey Mortimer had grown years younger in a couple of hours.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE Squire's state of serene exultation lasted all that evening. But with the next morning came reflection, as is so often the case. He was as much in love when he got up as he had been when he went to bed, which was a sure sign, he knew, that he was very really in love. But— It was just that, the morning brought a *but* with it.

Geoffrey, who of all men was most devoid of conceit, told himself that Miss Delmar was not the least likely to care for him, still less to marry him. To begin with, he had very little to offer her. Only an old name, which was nothing, and what must seem to her, the daughter of a millionaire, absolute poverty. To go on with, it was very improbable she would care the least for a prosaic, middle-aged widower, who had shown himself indifferent to her attractions so long. Geoffrey did not feel particularly middle-aged, but he had got into the habit of considering himself so. And, to end with, he believed she would marry handsome young Ted Calverley.

So when Madeline arrived at her usual hour that morning to take charge of Fidge, the Squire did not receive her with a declaration of his love, as in wild moments he had the previous evening almost dreamed of

doing. On the contrary, she detected nothing unusual in his manner as they met, and he soon went out, leaving her with the small invalid.

Just as she was expecting Mr Mortimer back, Prudence came in to say Mr Calverley was in the parlour, and would like to see her. Madeline's first impulse was to say she would not see him, but she reflected she had no particular reason for doing so, and, besides, he might have a message for Mr Mortimer.

Since that day on the ice she had seen absolutely nothing of Ted. Apparently quite overcome at her snubbing, as he called it, he had gone abroad with a friend for a month. The course of his wanderings had taken him to Monaco, and he would still have been there, had not a peremptory paternal summons brought him home, for a marvel, not in debt or bankrupt. Up till that moment, fortune had favoured him at the tables, and he was immensely disgusted at having to leave them, and all the fun he was having. But he was not yet in a position to disobey his father. As he termed it, Lord Eastanley 'had him on toast.'

Madeline only knew he had been abroad. Naturally kind-hearted, she had rather repented of her severity towards him, especially as he had been so cast down by it. Ted was able to assume the melancholy *rôle* at a moment's notice, but on this occasion it had not been all acting. He liked Miss Delmar, and he did not like being snubbed by her. He was beginning to grasp the fact that he must be a good boy, and marry her, and that perhaps after all with her matrimony might be a few degrees better than hanging. He had actually thought of her once or twice among the olives by the blue Mediterranean, and contrasted

her with some of the houris of the Casino. Altogether, he considered himself very much in love, and he told his mother as much, greatly to her delight.

She might not have chosen a soap-boiler's daughter for her son's wife, but a soap-boiler's daughter was infinitely better than a ballet-dancer, and when she was a Calverley, it would be easy to forget her origin. There was plenty of money, and old Delmar could probably be made to pay for seeing his daughter allied to the aristocracy. She would steady Ted down—a process he certainly needed. In his own rank of life he was too well known easily to find a wife.

When Madeline went down, Ted, good-looking and well-dressed as ever, was standing in the parlour by the fire in one of his graceful attitudes, his head turned towards the door, as if he eagerly awaited her approach. He was a little more grave than usual as they shook hands.

'I came to ask after little Fidge Mortimer,' he said. 'I only came home last night, and heard how bad he was.'

This was nothing but the truth. He had come to Ten Acre Farm solely with this purpose. He did not even know Miss Delmar was there, until Prudence, with unnecessary garrulity, told him she was in the house. He had intended going on to lunch at Crane Court.

Nothing he could have said would have pleased Madeline more. She was glad to find he cared enough for his friend to call in order to inquire after Fidge.

'He is much better,' she answered graciously, sitting down in one of the big arm-chairs. 'He is getting well now, but he has been dreadfully ill.'

'And you are helping to nurse him—lucky little chap! said Ted, sitting down too, where he could see her comfortably.

'Poor little man, he was so terribly hurt!' she answered seriously. 'I am glad to be able to do anything for him.'

'I almost wish I had been smashed in the accident!'

'Oh, Mr Calverley, don't say that!'

'If I had, perhaps you would have come to help nurse *me!*' he said softly.

Madeline disliked nonsense, and was half inclined to be angry. But she reflected it was not worth while, and so she merely laughed as she replied,—

'You know quite well I should have done nothing of the sort; and if I had, I am sure it would not have atoned to you for breaking a limb.'

'Ah, but it would—' Ted was beginning, his lazy voice a shade less lazy than usual, when in walked Mr Mortimer.

It gave the Squire a decidedly unpleasant sensation to see Ted Calverley and Miss Delmar talking earnestly together. He was conscious of feeling desperately jealous —another proof, had one been needed, of how much he was in love. He felt inclined to hate Ted, with whom he had always been such friends.

Madeline went upstairs again to Fidge, and left the two men together. Ted opened the door for her as she went out, with his usual polished grace. Lazy as his movements usually were, he reached it before Mortimer, and Madeline gave him a little smile of thanks, which was gall and wormwood to the latter.

'Confound you, Mortimer!' said Calverley, 'what induced you to come blundering in at that moment? You might as well have stayed away a little longer.'

'You had better put up a red flag next time you are

here, and don't want my presence,' said Mortimer good-humouredly, but with an effort. 'Did I interrupt anything very interesting?'

'No; I hadn't quite got to that—but I might have. She was nicer to me than she sometimes is.'

'I am sorry I was in the way. Are you serious, Ted?'

'I'm blowed if I'm not! If she'll have me, I mean to marry her. Mortimer, it's my fate, and I may as well submit with a good grace. She's not a bad sort, and a man might do worse. My mother will be pleased, and that will be a new sensation. The worst of it is, I never proposed to anyone before, and I don't know how to set about it. A girl wanted me to marry her once, but I declined the honour. I always was averse to matrimony, but I believe I've come to it now. But I mustn't say that to her. What am I to say? I wish I had your opportunities—seeing her every day and all day!'

Geoffrey set his teeth. He could not bear to hear the Honourable Ted talk in this frivolous way of the girl he loved. But he was powerless to do anything. He had never stopped Calverley before when he had conversed in this strain—he would only betray himself by attempting to stop him now. Ted did not care for Madeline half as much as he himself did, and yet she would probably marry him, and Mortimer would have to stand silently by. Loyalty would prevent him from making the faintest effort to forestall Calverley, had such a thing been possible. He had allowed the young man to confide in him, and he was incapable of the meanness of poaching on another man's preserves.

He looked at Ted Calverley—handsome, high-bred, and amusing—and he told himself it would be small wonder if Miss Delmar accepted him, and that he had been an egregious ass himself for not knowing his own mind until it was too late. Fond as he was of Ted, he did not think he would make a good husband, and he would have the additional pain of knowing Madeline would probably not be happy as his wife.

Calverley was gone when Madeline came down to lunch. Mortimer had plenty of self-command, and she did not detect any change in him. She was very far from guessing the revolution that had occurred in his feelings for her since the previous day.

A great event took place that afternoon. Fidge came downstairs for the first time since the accident. Well wrapped up, he was carried down to the parlour in his father's arms, Madeline following with delight. He celebrated the occasion by declining to allow Mortimer to go out again. Perhaps the Squire did not mind being kept in as much as he pretended, since Miss Delmar was there.

Owen Delmar fixed upon that afternoon to walk down to the Farm. It was the first time he had been so far, but, apart from a good-natured wish to see little Fidge, he had a great desire to behold Madeline at the Farm. This was what he saw when he entered the parlour.

A blazing fire made the room the picture of cheerfulness, in spite of its untidiness. Not far from the fire Mortimer was seated in a great arm-chair, one arm round Fidge, who was seated on one of his knees, his small face looking very pale and transparent by contrast with his

father's healthy colour. On his other knee a draught-board was carefully balanced. Close at his feet sat Madeline, on a footstool, playing draughts with Fidge, who was assisted by his father. At the moment Owen was shown in, the three heads were bent over the board, close together. The young man wickedly wished he could have taken them by instantaneous photography as a pretty picture of a family group.

They all three looked round as he came in. Mortimer held out his disengaged hand, saying,—

'This is very good of you, Delmar. You must excuse my getting up, but I shall upset the board if I do.'

'Please don't disturb yourselves. I am glad to see Fidge is so much better. Maidie has told me all about you, young man, and how bad you have been.'

'Delmar, I am almost ashamed to look at you,' said Mortimer. 'Every day have I meant to call on you, to ask how you were, and to thank you for your goodness to this boy in the accident. I know you carried him down to the Farm yourself, and, injured as you were, that can have been no joke.'

'It was nothing,' said Owen, smiling. 'As I did not know I was hurt, my sufferings cannot have been severe. Are you playing draughts?'

'Yes; but we've finished that game,' answered Fidge.

'Let's begin another then,' said Owen, drawing up a chair. 'It shall be you and I, Fidge, against your father and Maidie, and I bet you we'll beat them.'

The game caused many small confusions, thereby affording huge delight to Owen. Twice Madeline and

Geoffrey put out their hands to move the same man at the same moment. The girl blushed, and Mortimer laughed rather foolishly as their fingers met. Owen's roguish glances did not diminish their embarrassment. They then agreed they would make the move alternately. Mortimer, forgetting, was about to move out of his turn, when Fidge cried out excitedly,—'No, no, Dad—it's Maidie's turn!'

'Yes, it's Maidie's turn,' he replied. Then, discovering what he had called her, he added,—'I beg your pardon, Miss Delmar, Fidge's example is contagious.'

The game resulted, as Owen had predicted, much to Fidge's joy, in the ignominious defeat of Mortimer and Madeline.

'I expect they were not attending as much to the game as we were,' said Owen. 'They were thinking of something else.'

After that they sat talking for some time. Madeline could not move from her lowly position, for Fidge took possession of one of her hands, and began playing with her rings, pulling them off, and putting them on his own small fingers. Presently she discovered he had put one of them—a pretty half-hoop of pearls and brilliants—on his father's little finger. She saw Mr Mortimer, absorbed in an amicable political dispute with Owen, was totally ignorant of this, and she did not call his attention to it by making any remark. In a few moments Owen rose to go, and she sprang up too to accompany him. Fidge pushed her rings on, and she did not notice the pearl one was not among them. As she and her brother went out, she quietly stopped and made up the fire, as if she were at home.

Madeline was fully prepared to be teased by Owen as they walked up to Crane Court together. Nor was she mistaken. He was rather unmerciful, but then she reflected he did not know she really cared for Mr Mortimer. She determined he never should know. Altogether, she was not sorry when the walk came to an end. Owen had teased her all the time about her proximity to the Squire, about his having accidentally called her by her Christian name, and about the friendly footing she was on at the Farm. She parried his thrusts as best she could, and was sensible enough not to lose her temper.

Tea was up when they reached Crane Court. In spite of his talkativeness, Owen looked very tired as he sank into a chair, and Madeline drew off her gloves to pour out tea at once. As she did so, she uttered an exclamation of dismay.

'Oh, my pearl ring!'

'What! have you lost it?'

'No, but I forgot it.'

'Where did you leave it, then?'

'It—it's on Mr Mortimer's finger!' she stammered, blushing furiously.

Owen went into peals of laughter, and pretended to decline to believe how the ring came to be in that position. Madeline wondered what Mr Mortimer would say when he found it there. She was half ready to cry with vexation, and all the time Owen would do nothing but laugh, and then gaspingly entreat her not to make him laugh, because it hurt his side so much. And all the rest of the evening he kept on making sly allusions to her mislaid ring.

Mortimer had found it on his finger soon after the Delmars left, and Fidge told him he had put it there, and forgotten to take it off again. But Geoffrey did not remove it. He looked at it often that evening, and never without a thought of its owner.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DIRECTLY Madeline saw Mr Mortimer the next morning, she inquired for her ring, not without many blushes. Blushing is supposed to be out of fashion in this nineteenth century, but our heroine was in many respects old-fashioned. Amused at her embarrassment, Mortimer assured her her ring was quite safe, and showed it her on his finger. But when she asked him to give it back to her, he declared it would not come off. He looked so mischievous that she could hardly believe him, solemnly as he assured her it was tightly wedged on. At the same time, she could still less believe that the grave and stately Squire was joking with her.

The more she implored him to give her the ring, the more emphatically he asseverated it was impossible.

'It is a fixture,' he said. 'Unless I cut off my finger —which I do not feel disposed to do—here it will remain all the rest of my life. Don't you think it looks very nice?'

'No. It looks absurd on a man's hand.'

'The pearls show off the beautiful brown hue of my skin.'

'They certainly do that. Oh, Mr Mortimer, *please!* Papa gave me that ring, and I *must* have it back.'

'Mr Delmar will have to give you another. Well, if you don't believe me, try to take it off yourself.'

And he held out his hand.

But the ring was rather a tight fit, and Madeline was too shy to pull very hard at it, so it still remained on, and she gave up her efforts with a despairing sigh. She little guessed that the soft touch of her fingers on his had made Mr Mortimer's heart beat like a boy's.

He was away all that day, being obliged to attend a meeting on county business at the nearest town, some six miles off. As he walked there and back, he did not get home till late in the afternoon. Madeline had promised to stay at the Farm till he returned, but she was rather dismayed to see how late it was. She rose to go directly he appeared.

'Must you go?' he said. 'It is very good of you to have stayed so long with Fidge. He is a lucky boy to have a friend like you. Here is your ring!'

'Then you could get it off, Mr Mortimer!'

'I have got it off, with fearful struggles, since you wanted it so much. I nearly dislocated my finger in the effort. And I don't like parting with it. I never wore a ring like that before.'

Madeline gave him a glance of reproachful astonishment at his frivolity, and silently placing her ring on her own finger again, prepared to go. Mortimer noticed that the day was already closing in, and he was surprised, on glancing at the clock, to see how late it was.

'It is too late for you to go home alone,' he said. 'I will walk to the park gates with you.'

'Oh no! You must not do anything of the sort, after your long day,' she protested.

'That is nothing. I could not think of allowing you to walk home alone so late as this—it would not do at all,' he said decidedly, with that sort of grandfatherly air which made Madeline occasionally wonder whether he looked upon her as a contemporary of Fidge's.

'I give up when you speak in that tone,' she laughed, as they started. 'One would think you were a few centuries older than I am.'

'So I am, Miss Delmar—ages your senior.'

'How many ages, I wonder?'

'Oh, years have nothing to do with age!'

'Haven't they? It is generally supposed they have. Excuse my rudeness, Mr Mortimer,—how old are you? You needn't answer unless you like.'

'I was thirty-two last autumn,' he replied simply.

'Only thirty-two!' she said, with a little gasp. She was a little amazed to find what a young man he really was. 'Why, that's quite young! Vernon is more than that.'

'Did you think I was a hundred?' he asked, laughing. 'Well, so I am, in everything but years. I know I am an old fogey. You see, I came into this place before I was of age. Having a property, especially an impoverished one, to look after, ages a man. Then I was very young when I married, and only five-and-twenty when my wife died. Oh, I feel centuries old sometimes!'

'You seem centuries old sometimes—but not always,' she answered demurely.

'I will confess that I don't feel it—always,' he said, with a look at her which might have betrayed his meaning, had she seen it. But she was prosaically picking her way along the muddy lane, in the half light, and did not notice it.

She told him they had settled to give a small dance two nights after the Eastanley Castle one. It was to be quite a small affair, and Mrs Delmar said they would not allow her to give any supper.

'Mamma's ideas of a supper are rather extensive,' she said, laughing, 'so we thought if we impressed upon her there was to be no supper, we might succeed in having one of moderate dimensions. There will be something to eat, so you need not fear starvation.'

'Am I to come, Miss Delmar?'

'Of course you are. Yes; be sociable for once in your life, and come to our dance. We shall be very sorry if you don't.'

'But Fidge?'

'Mrs Parker shall go down and stop with Fidge. That excuse is disposed of.'

'Then I will come, if you wish me to,' he answered, certainly not accepting her invitation very gracefully, 'but I sha'n't enjoy myself.'

'Never mind, Mr Mortimer, it will be good for you.'

By this time they had reached the lodge gates, and here they parted. If Mortimer stood watching Miss Delmar's graceful figure until it was lost in the twilight, let us imagine it was only in order to protect her from his ances-

tral ghosts. In sooth, had they known their descendant had not only let his house to a soap-boiler, but had fallen in love with the soap-boiler's daughter, they might well have come forth from their resting-places. But Crane Court was not haunted. There was no legend of an awful tragedy taking place within its precincts. The Mortimers rested quietly in their graves, as became honest, God-fearing men and women.

After that evening, it became an established custom for Mortimer to walk to the gates with Miss Delmar. It was not particularly wise of either of them, seeing they both supposed themselves to be hopelessly in love, for these afternoon walks along the muddy lanes were calculated to increase their affection for each other. But Madeline, as we know, had long ago decided that she would rather have Geoffrey Mortimer's friendship than any other man's love. As for the Squire, being a man, he did not quite take this view of the case. In fact, he did not think very much about it at all, except that he liked being with her, and that he might as well see as much of her as he could, even though she might be going to marry Ted Calverley. They were not engaged yet. When they were, it would be time enough to turn over a new leaf, and try to get over his love as best he might. But each day he more keenly realised that this would be no easy task.

He was learning to love her more deeply each day. He was continually discovering something fresh and attractive in her grace and beauty, and in her frank friendliness to him, which was occasionally varied by a still more fascinating little attack of shyness. Formerly, he had only listened with scanty attention when Fidge made her the

topic of his conversation. Now, he encouraged the child to talk about her as much as he liked. Not that Fidge needed much encouragement,—he was ever ready enough to discourse about his Maidie darling.

His father had by this time told him about Margaret's death. He cried at the thought he would never see her again, but he was not nearly so much upset as Geoffrey had feared. A young child rarely takes in exactly what death means. Their minds have as yet little sense of proportion, and the fact that they will *never* see a person again does not mean much more to them than if they were told they would not see that person for a year; while of the horrible blank that death leaves, they, with their thousand tiny cares and interests, know nothing.

Besides, Fidge had been early accustomed to hear about death. To be told that Margaret had gone to be with his mother, that mother whom he could not remember, but about whom he had heard so much, seemed nothing strange or terrible, only right and natural. Had he not been brought up to know that if he were good, he would go to her too? In Geoffrey's teaching, death had been shorn of all its gloom and terror for the child.

But he was never allowed to forget Margaret. When he was stronger, he was told that it was supposed she had lost her life in trying to shield him from injury. To the end of his life he cherished a tender, grateful recollection of the good woman who had died in saving him.

The day of the Eastanley Castle ball Mortimer walked home with Madeline as usual. She went back quite early that day, so the lateness of the hour could not have been his reason for doing so. They were

talking about the ball, when Madeline asked, rather abruptly,—

'You and Mr Ted Calverley are great friends, are you not?'

'Yes, I suppose we are. We have known each other all our lives.'

'I suppose he has not always been very steady?'

Like a flash of lightning it darted through Mortimer's brain that Miss Delmar was questioning him about Ted Calverley, with a view to marrying him. He could have laughed at the irony of asking him, of all men, such questions with such an object. But at the same time it was extremely perplexing. Even had he not cared for her himself, it would have been very hard to answer her. Ted was his friend, therefore it was impossible he should say anything against him, but he was by no means the sort of man he could recommend as a husband.

He was not altogether wrong in his surmises. For the last time Madeline was hesitating whether she should marry the Honourable Ted if he asked her. She did not love him, but then she did love a man who, she thought, would never care for her, and love for her husband might come after marriage. Her parents wished it, and Ted had his merits, if she could only be sure of his steadiness. Poor girl, she felt very weary just then of her present life and its hopeless attachment, and very much in need of someone's love. All these reasons should perhaps be insufficient for marrying, but it is just for such reasons that hundreds of marriages are made every day.

'It would be idle to deny that Calverley has sown his wild oats,' said Mortimer quietly, no trace of his inward

perturbation appearing in his manner, 'but then so have many other men.'

'If he has sown them, and done with it. Do you think he really has turned over a new leaf, as he professes to have done?'

'I certainly know nothing to the contrary, Miss Delmar. I hope he has.'

Privately, Geoffrey did not think it was in Ted to become a reformed character, but there was no reason he should say this to her. And yet he could not endure the thought that she might be about to unite herself to a man who would make her miserable. For he knew she was a girl who would certainly be miserable if she were disappointed very much in anyone she loved. Loyalty to an old friend was fighting hard with love in Mortimer's heart. Perhaps the latter might have carried the day, had she pressed him much further, but she apparently did not find his answers very satisfactory, for she gave up with a sigh, and they walked on in silence for some minutes, Mortimer gloomily wondering whether the next thing he heard would be that she was engaged to Ted Calverley.

'Dad,' exclaimed Fidge, rather piteously that evening, having been twice taken up rather sharply by his father, 'Dad, am I naughty?'

'No, Fidge. Why?'

'Cos you've been so cross to me twice,' the child answered, with a quiver in his voice which showed that tears were not far off. He was still weak, and he was not accustomed to be sharply spoken to.

Then Geoffrey was seized with penitence, and gathered the little figure tenderly in his arms, and comforted him. He spent the rest of the evening amusing him—Fidge

little guessed with how sore a heart. But after Fidge had gone to bed came the long, lonely hours, longer and lonelier now than ever, to be got through. All the time his thoughts were with Madeline at the ball, and he was dreamily wondering what was happening there.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT is not very often that two men go to one ball each with the determination of making an offer of marriage. Proposals, doubtless, often are made at balls, especially, a cynic might say, after supper. But then they generally take place under the influence of excitement, on the spur of the moment, and are perhaps repented of next morning by the light of day, when it is too late.

But on the evening of the Eastanley Castle ball both Owen Delmar and Ted Calverley had made up their minds to put their fate to the test, if possible. Owen was feeling that he could endure the suspense no longer. Gertrude Digby loved him ; the knowledge of this would give him a power over her he had lacked when he spoke to her before. Surely, knowing this, he could make her own the truth. It was not possible her pride could live an instant in the strong current of his love and hers. Anyhow, he must learn his fate, once for all, that night.

As for Ted Calverley, he had at last come to the point he had so long dreaded, and he felt the sooner it was over the better. He could linger on the brink no longer. The time had come for the fatal plunge. His proceedings at

Monaco had reached his mother's ears, and she had spoken long and seriously to him. To appease her, he told her he had only gone there in despair, because Miss Delmar had snubbed him, but that now she was kinder again, and that he meant to ask her to be his wife the very first opportunity. So, though it had no visible effect on his soft, sleepy manner, he drank rather more champagne than usual at dinner that evening, in order to nerve himself to make a desperate effort.

Yet, strange to say, neither of the two contemplated proposals were made that night, owing to different causes.

Madeline felt very listless and weary as she dressed for the ball. This operation, so interesting to many girls, was only an intolerable bore to her. She never cared very much for balls, and to-night she knew her heart was so entirely elsewhere that she would dislike the whole thing. She did not mean to let Ted Calverley propose to her, if he showed intentions of doing so, for she had not yet quite made up her mind what answer to give him. But he never had proposed yet, though he had often appeared on the brink of doing so. This tardiness would have angered her past endurance had she loved him. As she did not, it did not vex her the least.

He was at her side the instant she entered the ball-room, and claimed her attention directly she had shaken hands with his mother, who received her very graciously. He noticed with pleasure that there were few prettier girls than Miss Delmar in the room that night. She was dressed in white, a gown the costly simplicity of which was the envy of many a less wealthy maiden. White always showed up her pure colouring and soft beauty to best advantage.

Ted put his name down on her card for three dances close together at the end of the evening. Then, or never, he meant to come to the point. The sight of her prettiness gave him more courage than even the champagne had done.

Presently he brought up a friend to introduce to her, This was Charlie Myers, the chum with whom he had been abroad. He had been struck by Miss Delmar's grace and beauty, and on learning she was the girl Ted contemplated marrying, had begged to be introduced. With easy good-nature Calverley complied, little dreaming he thereby finally ruined his cause with her, though already, now that she saw him, Madeline had mentally compared him with Geoffrey Mortimer, and decided she could not marry him. For, without the faintest intention of letting any cat out of any bag, thinking that Ted Calverley's proceedings must be perfectly well known to all his friends, Myers happened to enlighten her to some extent as to the way he and his friend had amused themselves in the Riviera. Then she knew Calverley was not a reformed character in the least, and she felt angry with him for all his pretended penitence.

A ball was a source of great excitement to Gertrude Digby. She had not been to very many, and she dearly loved dancing and gaiety of all sorts. She danced extremely well, and she was pretty enough always to secure plenty of partners. She had never yet been to a ball without enjoying herself immensely. And she meant to enjoy the Eastanley Castle one, even though there existed in the world such a disturbing element as Owen Delmar. She wondered very much whether he would be there or not. Probably not, she thought. He had not yet appeared

in the hunting-field—probably he would not be well enough to dance.

In truth, Owen's people were very angry with him for attempting to go to the ball at all, and declared it was madness on his part; but he had made up his mind to go. And when Owen Delmar had made up his mind to a thing, it would have been almost as easy to turn Niagara as to prevent him doing it. Any day might bring him a summons to town he could not neglect, and he felt he must see Gertrude before he went. Yet he had resolved not to go to Daltons until she herself voluntarily asked him, and this ball gave him the only chance of an interview with her.

When she saw him, she knew he was there only to meet her, and with a swift presentiment she felt that her hour of capitulation had come. It was rather dreadful, certainly, but then she had grown somewhat weary of trying to hold out. It would be rather sweet to yield herself up to his stronger will—for she knew his will was the stronger—once and for all, and never struggle any more.

So she gave him what dances he asked for, with such meekness that he too felt a presentiment his hour had come. He wrote his name once or twice rather low down on her card, as Ted had done on Madeline's, and the look he gave her as he moved away sent a strange thrill through her.

Presently Owen, who was not dancing more than he could help, noticed that Madeline too was standing still. He found she was not engaged, and he suggested they should go and sit down in the conservatory, where it would be cooler than the hot ballroom. She gladly complied. She would as gladly dance with, or even talk to,

Owen as any man in the room. Certainly there were not many who could dance as well, or talk as amusingly.

After strolling once round the beautiful, dimly-lighted conservatory, they sat down on two chairs which were placed with their backs to a great camelia bush in full bloom. When they seated themselves, they did not notice who was at the other side of the bush, nor indeed that anyone was there at all. Apparently the brother and sister were not in a conversational mood, and being brother and sister, they saw no reason to talk unless they felt inclined, so they were silent. Neither of them had the faintest idea of eavesdropping, but they could not help hearing what was said quite clearly close to them.

'There have been one or two changes in this neighbourhood since I was here last,' said a masculine voice. 'Are there not some new people at that lovely old place, Crane Court?'

'Yes,' replied Gertie Digby's voice; 'some very new people, in every sense of the word. Geoffrey declared he could not afford to live there any longer, so it was to let, and these Delmars took it.'

'What are they like?'

'Too horrible for words. The father was a City man, and he absolutely reeks of money. Never talks of anything else, in short. They say he was a soap-boiler, and I can easily believe it.'

'Fancy a man of that sort at Crane Court!'

'Isn't it melancholy? One has to know them, as they live at Geoffrey's place, but they are people one would naturally avoid. Then Mrs Delmar—she is absolutely appalling. She looks like a cook dressed in her mistress's clothes, and her *h*'s are all over the place. Ted

Calverley is the *H*onourable Ted, and on a warm day she is very 'ot.'

'Come away, Maidie!' said Owen, in a low, choked voice. 'We have already heard too much!' And they rose, and moved away, before their presence had even been suspected by Gertrude and her partner.

Maidie's eyes were filled with tears. Gertrude's remarks had hurt her cruelly.

'Do you think that is what everybody says about us?' she asked tremulously. 'Oh, it is rather hard! We never pretend to be different to what we are?'

She did not expect to get very much sympathy from Owen. As a rule, he laughed at her for caring what people said, and told her it was absurd to mind being considered a parvenu. But now she was surprised to see he was in a white rage, with clenched fists and blazing eyes. She had never seen him look so angry before.

'It is unwarrantable,' he said, still in the same low, half-strangled voice.

'She has no right, none whatever, to say such things of us! How dare she speak of our parents in that way? She has often enough accepted their hospitality.'

'It is very hard,' repeated Madeline plaintively. 'I had began to think people liked us better, and now to find that is the tone used about us!'

'Never mind, Maidie,' said Owen, beginning to recover himself. 'It's not *people*, it's only Miss Digby. Don't look so distressed.'

And here Madeline's next partner was seen coming in pursuit of her, and before very long she had a little recovered her annoyance.

But Owen? 'Only Miss Digby.' Did not the sting of

the whole thing for him lie in those words? He would not have cared the least had he overheard anyone else say what she had said.

He was still white to the very lips, and there was still that look of concentrated rage in his eyes when the first dance they were to have together began. He waited a minute or two, and then he went up to her, and bowed.

'This *was* our dance, Miss Digby,' he said, in low, cutting tones, audible only to her, but conveying more idea of suppressed passion than the loudest could have done, 'but as we Delmars are people whom you only *have* to know because we rent your cousin's house, it is a pity you should put yourself to such penance as dancing with me must be. I therefore do not claim my dances. And another time, when you wish to mock people from whom you have accepted hospitality, behind their backs, take care that none of their relations are within earshot.'

Gertrude flushed crimson, and was about to reply, but with another low bow he was gone, and she did not see him again that evening. She was not angry—she only felt she would have liked to sink into the earth with shame and mortification. She knew she had thoroughly deserved his anger and reproaches. And she felt that she had at last effectually—more effectually even than when she had refused him—put an end to anything between them. He had loved her, and she had killed his love. On her part, she had never loved him so well as she did now that she had lost him.

What had induced her to speak in that mocking way of the Delmars, especially that evening, when she was just resigning herself to the prospect of becoming allied to them? Had Owen proposed to her, and had she accepted

him, in a few days the engagement would have been public, and then the man to whom she had been speaking might have remembered her words, and would probably have repeated them. Nothing could have been in worse taste or more foolish — Gertrude realised that now in the depths of her humiliation.

The fact was, she had spoken without thinking at all. She was excited,—a little *tête montée*, as the French call it, and she had been talking merely for the sake of talking. Mockery of the Delmars had become a habit with her long ago, and was a pastime so easily indulged in. In her own mind, she so entirely disassociated Owen from his people. And now she had done for herself, and the brilliant, gifted man who had been her lover must both hate and despise her. She went through the rest of the evening, and laughed, and danced, and talked like one in a dream, but she was intensely relieved when at last it was over.

The Delmars had left much earlier. Mrs Delmar, much as she was enjoying the brilliant scene, and the aristocratic company, had been much perturbed to see how white and ill Owen looked.

'Now didn't I tell you you weren't strong enough to come to a ball!' she exclaimed. 'I know your side is hurting—you ought to be at 'ome and in bed. Shall I tell your father to get the carriage?'

'No, no, it's nothing,' he answered, rather sharply. 'I can't have Maidie dragged away in the middle of the evening.'

But Madeline happening to come up with her partner, was also struck by his appearance, and quite truthfully protested she would like to go home very much, as she, too, was tired. So it chanced that the Delmars were almost

the first departures from Lady Eastanley's ball; and when the time came for Ted's dances with Madeline, he discovered she was gone, and that his proposal would have to be deferred till another day. It was a reprieve, and yet he felt half sorry he had not got it over and done with, when he had worked himself up to the point.

The next day Owen went to London, in response to a telegram received in the morning, leaving his people much disturbed that he would not be present at the small dance at Crane Court the following night.

Like Gertrude, he felt that everything was over between them. A girl who really loved him could not have spoken in that way of his parents, or if she did love him, he could not possibly marry her. Besides, she probably hated him now, after the way in which he had spoken to her in his rage. What it cost him to feel himself balked in a scheme on which he had so set his heart, no one knew but himself. Moreover, his love had not been killed. The worst of it was, he loved Gertrude rather more than ever. Owen Delmar had never been so thoroughly wretched in his life.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GEOFFREY MORTIMER felt thoroughly out of humour for the Delmars' dance as he walked up to Crane Court the evening on which it took place, after a last glance to assure himself that Fidge was comfortable, and sleeping soundly. He had not been to a dance since his wife died. He had got out of the way of going to them then, and had never begun again, so that for that reason alone he knew he should feel extremely out of it. Then he dreaded to see Crane Court *en fête*, and to be there as a guest, a feeling for which he most heartily despised himself, but which he experienced acutely, nevertheless. It is one thing to be aware you are a fool, and another to get over your folly. Besides, he had a painful presentiment of what he might hear about Miss Delmar and Ted Calverley. He had not seen her since the day of the Eastanley Castle ball—she had sent a note to Fidge to say she was too busy to come down to the Farm. Fidge had missed her a good deal, but not half so much as his father had done. The days seemed meaningless and objectless to him when he did not see her.

A dance at Crane Court was a lovely sight. The house

was admirably arranged for it. Dancing took place in the great inner hall, or saloon. Mrs Delmar had been very despairing about lights and decorations, but her children had sternly prohibited any attempts at the latter. It was a small dance, they reminded her, not a large ball. They knew Crane Court looked beautiful enough, and would only be spoilt by decorations. As for lights, it was utterly impossible to light a place as Mrs Delmar wished, without gas, but the old oak floors and panels gleamed in response to the more suitable radiance of lamps and candles innumerable.

The dark shining oak made a perfect setting to the pretty dresses and fair faces of the girls, and everyone protested they had seldom seen a prettier dance, to Mrs Delmar's huge delight. Even the grim old Mortimer ancestors on the walls seemed to look down on the gay scene with unusual benignity. Perhaps they thought of the many times they had seen the old house in like festive array.

Madeline, engaged in the numerous duties of an only daughter of the house, was suddenly aware that, moving slowly through the gay crowd, looking his gravest and stateliest, was the hereditary owner of the house. Not even the first evening he had dined there had been more fraught with pain to him than was this dance. The house was full of ghosts to him, and old recollections, and the lights and the music jarred upon him terribly. Half the younger people—those who were dancing most vigorously—were unknown to him. Many of the faces were strange. He had gone so little into society, that this was naturally the case, but it seemed unnatural and painful to him.

'You see I have come!' he said to Madeline, with a grave smile, as he shook hands with her. As usual, the sight of her with her quiet dress and manner, was a relief to him in his troubled mood.

But she, glancing up at him, felt she had been rather cruel in making him come there that night. With her never-failing instinct, she knew the sight of his old home *en fête* was distasteful to him.

'It is very good of you,' she said. 'I hope you won't be very much bored. You can go home early, if you are.'

'Thanks. I feel out of my element, that is all. But I will remember what you say—that it is good for me. It is, very,' he added, smiling.

But she shook her head with a small sigh.

'I am not sure I was right,' she said. 'Perhaps, after all, you don't need it.'

But here her partner claimed her attention, and Mortimer moved away. Apparently the idea of asking her for a dance had never crossed his mind. She was half amused and half vexed. But she noticed he did not dance with anyone. He merely stood watching, and talking to the chaperons, the odd men, and the girls who had no partners, with perfect impartiality. Evidently the evening was, in his estimation, merely a period to be got through somehow. Not that he looked bored; but even if he felt so, he was too much of a gentleman to allow it to appear; only Madeline knew him so well now that she knew what that calm stateliness covered, and her heart ached for him.

She was quite right. Geoffrey Mortimer was ardently longing to be at home. But she did not guess that one of the causes of his depression was the unpleasant feelings he

experienced at seeing her monopolised by different young men, Ted Calverley foremost among them. Mortimer positively hated the sight of them all, yet he felt everyone of them had a better right to be attentive to her than he had.

Ted's assiduities were quite marked that evening. He was resolved not again to let his opportunity slip. He was always at Miss Delmar's side on the smallest occasion, scarcely dancing with anyone else.

Gertrude Digby was not there. She felt she could not possibly meet Owen Delmar after what had passed, at any rate under his own roof, so she pleaded a severe headache. She might have saved herself the trouble of inventing an excuse, for, as we know, Owen was not at the dance either. While he, sitting in the House of Commons, listening to the somewhat vehement diatribes of the honourable member for North Ballymore, imagined her to be dancing in the house of the people she had so maliciously scoffed at, she was crying herself to sleep in her own room, as unhappy a girl as any in East Elmshire. Madeline was not sorry she did not appear, though she did not guess the true cause of her absence. She had no idea of what had passed between Owen and Gertrude. But after what she had overheard at Eastanley Castle, she felt it would have been difficult to be civil to her.

Miss Delmar must assuredly have been touched by Ted Calverley's devotion that evening, had she been a little bit in love with him, or had Geoffrey Mortimer not been present. But when he was there, all other men became as nothing to her. She always knew precisely what portion of the room he was in, and she was conscious of a blank feeling when she could not see him.

'Pretty girl, that Miss Delmar,' said Mr Digby to Mortimer.

They stood at the foot of the old oak staircase watching the dancing.

'Very,' replied the Squire briefly.

'I really think Ted means business. It will be a tremendous rise for the soap-boiler if she does catch him.'

Mortimer frowned. He did not at all approve of this tone being employed about Miss Delmar.

'I don't think she is the sort of girl to try to "catch" anyone,' he said coldly.

'Well, her mother has been trying it for her, then. I only know I wish I had some of the Delmar ducats.'

'A good many of us do that!' replied Mortimer, laughing. 'Ducats of any sort would be extremely welcome to me just now.'

'You haven't let any of your farms yet?'

'No, I haven't even had a nibble for them. Until times alter, I fear I sha'n't.'

And then the two country gentlemen plunged into the ever-fruitful theme of agricultural depression, and free trade, but all the time the younger man never lost sight of a certain graceful figure in white.

But it was not until the evening was half over that he approached her again. Seeing her then disengaged for a moment, he went up to her.

'I must congratulate you on the success of your dance,' he said. 'Everyone seems enjoying themselves hugely.'

'Except you, Mr Mortimer. I am almost surprised to

see you are still here. Now, please, don't crush me by putting on your stately air.'

'I won't—because I think you are uncrushable. Have you had any supper yet?'

'No, and I should like some very much,' she replied, putting her gloved hand on his arm. She knew this was going to be the best part of the evening to her.

They were soon comfortably established at a small table in a corner of the dining-room. Mortimer looked round with a laugh,—

'Is this what Mrs Delmar calls "no supper?"' he inquired.

'Yes; so I leave it to your imagination what her idea of a supper would be,' answered Maidie. 'Owen and I say that enough is as good as a feast.'

'By-the-bye, I am so sorry he is not here.'

'Owen? Yes, he was obliged to go yesterday. They rather anticipate the division will come on to-night, so I suppose he could not be let off for so frivolous an excuse as a dance—especially as he can't dance much yet, poor fellow.'

'He is a true politician,' said Mortimer. 'You must be very proud of him, Miss Delmar. He is wonderfully clever for so young a man.'

She looked up with a pleased smile.

'We are proud of him,' she said. 'Is it not lucky he was allowed to follow his own bent, and not made to go into the army? People like us are so fond of putting their sons into the army, that they may associate with their betters, and get into good society.'

Mortimer looked at her with amusement, as he replied,—

'Do you know you are very embarrassing, Miss Delmar?'

'Why?' she asked innocently.

'Why should you talk of yourselves as "people like us," in that way?'

'Oh, you know what I mean! Of course we know quite well we aren't like you, and the Digbys, and I don't think we mean to pretend to be; only people sometimes imagine we do,' she added, with a sigh at the recollection of Gertie Digby's remarks.

Mortimer could only laugh at her naïveté, and her perfect knowledge of the distinctions of birth.

At this moment Mr Delmar came by. He, good man, was beaming with pleasure at the success of the evening, and delight at seeing everyone enjoying themselves. He was the most hospitable of men, and very ready to employ his wealth in giving pleasure to other people. He was glad to use it in doing good, too, as the poor of Craneham and the county infirmaries and hospitals could testify.

He now came up to his daughter and Mortimer, and after pinching Maidie's cheek, and asking how she was getting on, he hit the Squire a resounding clap on the shoulder, exclaiming, in his loud, hearty voice,—

'Well, Mortimer, we've managed to brighten up your old place a bit, haven't we?'

He did not mean it unkindly, but Madeline winced. She would have given worlds to have prevented him from making that remark. She, who knew well enough now what exile from Crane Court was to him, knew that it must have pained Geoffrey Mortimer. But if it did, he

allowed absolutely no trace of it to appear in either voice or manner. He answered quietly,—

'You certainly have, Mr Delmar. The dance is a great success.'

'Crane Court is always lovely,' murmured Madeline softly; adding, 'See, papa, there's Mrs Graham looking about for something. Do go and see what she wants!'

Away bustled Mr Delmar, quite unconscious of what he had done. But Mortimer was aware that Madeline had been made uncomfortable, and he exerted himself to remove her embarrassment, by talking gaily and serenely. In so doing, he speedily forgot his own slight annoyance.

They sat some time in the supper-room. After that Mortimer left, and Maidie knew the evening was practically over for her too when he was gone. Then, while everyone else was dancing a country dance—a scene an artist might gladly have painted—in the old hall, Ted Calverley proposed to Madeline, as they sat in the empty drawing-room. She tried to stop him when he first began, but he was not to be stopped this time.

He usually said the right thing at the right moment. Awkwardness was unknown to him, and he was not flustered by any undue nervousness. It must be confessed he spoke extremely well, and he even managed to infuse a little eagerness into his habitually sleepy tones. He said he knew he had not always been all he ought, but that he had now turned over a new leaf. Madeline thought of Monaco. If she would only marry him, he pleaded, with that touch of pathos that so well became him, he would honestly try to make her a good husband and be a better

fellow for her sake. She might be the salvation of him. And he looked at her imploringly out of his fine dark eyes, while his voice took the lowest and softest accents.

Six months—even three months previously, Madeline's heart would probably have melted within her, and she would have married the handsome scamp. Nine women out of ten are pleased to think they can be the means of reforming a rake. But now she was adamant. Very gently, but equally decisively, she refused him, solely on the ground that she did not love him. She knew this was her true reason, so she said nothing about her belief that his repentance and reform were not sincere.

Ted took his refusal with great meekness, and every appearance of deep sorrow of heart. Perhaps for a little while he was sorry. He had never liked anyone before so much as Madeline. He had, in fact, cared for her as much as he knew how. And no man likes to be rejected. His mother pitied him a good deal, and was very indignant that a parvenu's daughter should have dared to refuse her darling son. It may be guessed he made the most of his dejection, for Lady Eastanley's benefit.

The Earl somewhat unkindly observed that Ted was a failure all round. Neither the free and enlightened voters of East Elmshire nor Miss Delmar would have anything to say to him. He could not succeed either in politics or love. Lord Eastanley hinted it was his own fault, a suggestion the Countess furiously denied. But his lordship was not far wrong. Had he taken a little more trouble, East Elmshire might have returned him, and had he been less dilatory in his wooing, Madeline would probably have

accepted him, before she ever discovered she cared for someone else.

But Ted was always glad he was not in Parliament, and he very soon consoled himself that he had not been bound in the fetters of matrimony.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

'"NOW is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York,"'

murmured Owen Delmar softly to himself, nearly two months later. But he could not have said why these two lines of Richard's occurred to him at that moment, except that the sun was shining with a warmth and brightness it had not displayed for many months. The quotation, Owen felt, was by no means an appropriate one. It was not summer yet, only spring, and cold winds and late frosts might still be held in reserve; while as for the 'winter of his discontent,' he knew full well that was by no means over.

He had come to Crane Court, where he had not been since the ball at Eastanley Castle, for a few days at Easter, but he had no intention of spending the whole of the recess at home. Easter fell late that year, and brought a burst of beautiful weather with it, so the country in East Elmshire was looking its very loveliest. Every day of her first spring spent in the country was a fresh delight and surprise to Madeline. Nor was Owen by any means blind

to the beauty around him, as he stood in the Crane Court avenue, and listened to the song of a lark, which sounded far up in the blue ether above him.

The air was full of an indescribable feeling of young life, and exultation in that life. The chestnuts were bursting into leaf, the elms were tinged with the most delicate green, and the bright-coloured young grass in the park was starred with celandine and daisies. Far away on the uplands could be seen a great patch of golden gorse, while nestling near at hand among the roots of the elms and in the borders of the shrubberies were primroses innumerable, and shining arum leaves.

But it may be presumed that man, unless he be poet or painter, requires something more than even the most perfect spring beauty to satisfy his soul. Certainly Owen looked a long way from content, in spite of the joyous loveliness about him. He was thinner and more restless, and had more the appearance of being all eyes than ever. He had been working extremely hard the last two months. In addition to his other duties, he was employing his spare time in writing the history of a certain great political movement which had taken place some years previously, long enough ago to have become historic. It was a work which required great insight, and no small research. When published, it was likely, people said, to be as much a prophecy as a history, so ably was he bringing the subject to bear on the present crisis. His party looked upon him as one of the most brilliant rising men in their ranks.

He went a good deal into society, and altogether he had hardly had a moment's rest since he left Crane Court.

His people told him that the life he led did not agree with him, but he scoffed at the idea. But he could have told them, if he chose, what was the matter with him. He could not get over his disappointment about Gertie Digby. He could not get over being foiled in a matter about which he cared so much. How much he did not know, until he had given up all thought of marrying her, and then this clever, brilliant politician found out that without one little auburn-haired girl, life was rather a blank to him, though his friends were fond of telling him he was the most successful man they knew.

Presently he heard the sound of hoofs on the carriage road, accompanied by the gay tones of a child, and a man's deep, musical voice replying to them. Owen roused himself, and went down the drive to meet the two Mortimers, Fidge, perched on Shaggy, keeping close to his father's side, with old Rollo in attendance. Rollo growled when he saw Owen, whom he did not know. He never growled at anyone except a tramp in the highroad, but once within the precincts of Crane Court, he considered it his duty to keep off intruders.

'Quiet old fellow,' said Mortimer, laying his hand on the dog's neck. 'Delmar has more right here than you have.'

'How are you, youngster?' asked Owen of Fidge, who had given a whoop of delight at seeing him which would have disturbed the peace of mind of any less composed pony than Shaggy. 'You look more fit than when I last had the pleasure of seeing you.'

'I'm all right, thanks, Mr O.o. Oh, I was very bad then, wasn't I? and we beat Dad and Maidie at draughts?'

'Because they wouldn't attend. Does Maidie go to see you now?'

'No, she never comes to the Farm now. Why doesn't she, I wonder? I suppose it's cos I come to see her so often.'

'I think Fidge has recovered the accident more completely than you have, Delmar,' said Mortimer. 'You are not looking well.'

'So my people tell me. The fact is, you country people get so disgustingly robust, and in such rude health, that when you see a man with the ordinary complexion of a Londoner, you think he is at death's door. Are you going up to the house?'

'We were going to tell your sister that Fidge won't be able to come for his music lesson to-morrow, as he is going to Daltons for the day,' replied Mortimer, with calm promptitude.

But Owen thought to himself it was a new thing the Squire should accompany his son on these small errands to the Court. Then, glancing at Mortimer's face, he smiled slowly to himself at something he saw there. And he told himself with approval that his sister's lover was a fine-looking man. Geoffrey showed tall and handsome and stalwart in his rough shooting suit, his soft hat set carelessly on his sunny curls. Something of the bright spring morning had found its way into his face and grey eyes, and he looked younger than Owen had ever seen him before. Fidge had put an early oxslip in his button-hole, which gave him a festive air. Something had decidedly come to the grave young Squire, and Owen had a shrewd suspicion he knew what it was.

'Well, I give them my blessing,' he said to himself, as he walked up the avenue, chatting to the Squire —his future brother-in-law, as he mentally designated him.

As they approached the house, he observed Mortimer glance several times towards the garden, but he did not know what he was looking at, until Fidge suddenly exclaimed, 'There's Maidie!' when he felt convinced Mortimer had seen her all along. He now tied Shaggy to the wire fence which there separated the garden from the park, lifted Fidge off the pony and over the railing, and lightly jumping it himself, made his way towards where Madeline was to be seen among the flower-beds. A small gate in the fence was only a few yards off, and to this Owen turned his steps, followed by old Rollo, who knew quite well where the gate was, and who was of an age not to jump railings unless he could help it.

'We are not in such a desperate hurry, are we, old chap?' said Owen to him. 'I wonder how you will like having a new mistress. You belonged to Mrs Mortimer the First, didn't you? And I wonder very much how Maidie likes there having been a Mrs Mortimer the First?'

'Fidge and I were just wondering why you never came to see us now?' said the Squire to Madeline, having watched with considerable envy the rapturous greeting between his son and her.

'It seems to me I see you pretty often,' she answered smiling.

'Because we come to see you. But it is ages since you have been to the Farm, Miss Delmar.'

She smiled again, but blushed a little. Geoffrey loved to see her blush like that. Somehow, his question was not very easy to answer. It was so perfectly obvious to her why she did not go to the Farm, that she felt sure he must know, and was only teasing her.

'Fidge is all right, and comes to see me now,' she answered. 'I have no need to go to see him.'

'It is evidently only charity that impels you to do so' he said. 'One of us will have to get injured again, to induce you to come. I expect you have too vivid a recollection of my lunches.'

'No, not at all! They were very good!' she rashly exclaimed.

'Then come again. Will you come to tea with us one day? The cherry jam is not all finished.'

'Owen and I would like to come to tea some day very much,' answered Madeline demurely, suddenly bethinking herself of this way out of the difficulty.

Mortimer laughed merrily.

'I shall be delighted to see your brother, Miss Delmar, but since when have you needed a chaperon before you can come to the Farm?'

Maidie blushed more than ever at finding her little ruse so detected, but she answered bravely enough,—

'It is all your fault, you see, Mr Mortimer. You are getting so young and frivolous.'

'Oh, it's I you require the chaperon to protect you from. I wasn't sure it mightn't be Fidge. Yet I am your future father-in-law, Miss Delmar!'

So they went on teasing each other for some time in the way so delightful to people in their circumstances.

But it was not particularly interesting to a third person, as Owen found, especially when that third person's own small affairs have gone so hopelessly wrong as his had done, so he took Fidge off to the stables, though it was not for some time that his father noticed his absence.

'Dad and Maidie are always talking to each other now,' said Fidge. 'Often they talk about things I don't understand.'

'It's always dull when people do that, isn't it?' said Owen.

'Very. But are there things *you* don't understand? I though you were very clever, and knew everything?'

'Oh, yes; there are some things I don't pretend to understand,' said Owen, laughing. 'How the apple gets into a dumpling, and why a woman generally says one thing when she means another, for instance.'

'Do they?' asked Fidge, open-eyed.

'Ask Dad what he thinks!' was all the answer he obtained, and in another moment he had forgotten all about the puzzle, and was earnestly entreating to be taken up into the hay loft.

The fine weather had tempted some energetic people to begin lawn tennis, and the Delmars had that morning received an invitation to the Ropers' for the afternoon. Madeline had previously promised to go to tea with Mrs Townley, who was ill, and Mr Delmar was engaged. But Mrs Delmar was anxious to go, being always ready for any gaiety. She was so vexed that no one would go with her, that Owen arranged to accompany her, much

as he disliked doing so, for he knew he would probably meet Gertrude Digby. However, he was always a good son, and he was particularly anxious to please his mother, because he knew he had vexed her by announcing he would not spend his whole Easter holiday at home.

Impromptu though it had been, Mrs Roper had quite a large party. People were very glad to meet again, after the long, dull winter. For in East Elmshire people who did not hunt saw very little of each other during the winter. Distances were so great, and the roads so bad, that it was only at an occasional ball they met. But the afternoon was warm and lovely, and Mrs Roper had a pleasant drawing-room for those who were afraid to be out of doors.

As Owen had foreseen, the Digbys were there. He merely took off his hat to Gertrude, without making an effort to address her. He had long ago forgiven her her unlucky speech in the conservatory, but he did not forget his own angry reproaches to her. He had heard from Maidie that she and Gertrude had become great friends, and had quite made up their little differences, but all this made no difference in his feelings.

He declined to play tennis, saying he had not brought his racquet, because he was shamefully out of practice. Perhaps he recollected a former party at this very house, when he and Gertie had been put to play together. He had not minded her manifestations of dislike and caustic speeches then. Now he felt he would not be able to bear them. He did not know many people at the party—he had not been enough in East Elmshire to have a great

number of acquaintances—and perhaps he did not care to make the effort to talk to those he did know. So he sat on a bench watching a game of lawn tennis, and feeling dull and weary, both physically and mentally. Miss Digby was playing tennis, but not in the set he was watching. But he could now and then get a distant glimpse of her through the still leafless boughs of some trees. Seeing her, and being there, reminded him with painful acuteness of all he had once hoped for, and lost.

If he could but have known the wild flutter of excitement that had been taking place in Gertrude's heart ever since she had returned his distant salutation! Poor little Gertie—two very weary months had taught her to know her own mind at last, and shown her what utter folly it had been to play with her happiness. But it was too late to recall that now. Mr Owen Delmar must hate her—as indeed he evidently did—but there was just one little thing she had to say to him before the episode of her acquaintance, and all it had entailed, might be sealed down for ever.

Having finished her game of tennis, and declining to play another, she managed to break away from her friends. She made her way straight to the bench where Owen was sitting. As she approached him, she observed how tired and pale he looked. There was no one else near, so that it was evidently to him she was coming, with the sun gleaming on her lovely hair, and her face flushed with determination. He rose to his feet, turning rather white. She noticed his emotion, and her heart gave a great throb. She was still something to him, then.

'Have you ever seen the hothouses here?' she asked composedly.

'No, never,' he replied, wondering.

'Shall we go and look at them, then?' she suggested.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LIKE a man in a dream, Owen Delmar followed Miss Digby round the outside of the house and into the kitchen garden. She talked quietly and indifferently all the way, and he responded as best he might in his amazement. For once, she was far the more composed of the two.

She led the way to a hothouse which was free from gardeners, Owen followed her, and mechanically closed the door behind him, to keep out the colder air. Then she turned round and faced him.

'Mr Delmar, I have something to say to you,' she began, in a voice that trembled a little, in spite of her efforts to steady it. 'You must consider me beneath contempt, I know, but I want to that tell you I am very sorry for what I said that evening at the ball. It was horrid of me to talk in that way. I didn't even mean what I said—I was only talking for the sake of talking; but you probably won't believe that!' she added, rather sadly.

Owen flushed crimson.

'Don't—don't say that, Miss Digby!' he cried, more moved than she had ever seen him. 'It is I who should apologise. I was in a beastly rage, and I had no right to speak to you as I did. It was ungentlemanly. To

begin with, I ought not to have overheard what you said—though I did it unintentionally.

'No, I am altogether to blame, not you, but I did not mean it. There, I don't expect you to forgive me, but I wanted just to tell you I was sorry for being such a brute,' she said, with an unsteady little laugh.

'It's awfully good of you!' exclaimed Owen. 'Of course, Maidie and I know perfectly well we are different to you, and we don't mind. We know you despise us, but perhaps we are a little sensitive about our parents—'

Gertrude held out her hand imploringly.

'Please don't talk like that,' she begged. 'It makes me feel such a *worm*.'

'Then we won't talk about it any more,' he said, smiling, recovering his self-control; 'only I thought you would never speak to me again.'

'That wouldn't have been much loss to you, when I'm such a spiteful little cat,' murmured she.

'Allow me to be the best judge of that,' he replied. 'Tell me how your horse is.'

'Still lame. He has been lame ever since Christmas, and I doubt if he will ever get right. I have had no hunting at all. I don't suppose I shall have any more now; I shall get fat.'

'Is that always the case? I have hardly hunted at all this winter either. I wonder if I shall become corpulent?'

'It seems to have had just the opposite effect on you at present,' she said, glancing at him. 'What have you been doing to yourself?'

'Trying to make up my mind to do without something I wanted very much but could not have,' he replied enigmatically.

'I don't think the process has agreed with you. Had we not better go back to the others now? I hope you have looked at the plants well?'

'I haven't given them a thought. But I don't think they're much of it, are they?'

'No, I should say not. I never heard of anyone coming to look at them before,' she answered, laughing. 'Mr Delmar, will you and Maidie come to tea to-morrow afternoon? You can look at my poor hunter, and tell me if you think there is any hope for him.'

'Yes, I will come,' said Owen, accepting her first invitation in those simple words. Then he added. rather as an afterthought,—'No doubt Maidie will come too.'

He felt the rest of that afternoon as if he were treading on air, and he was not in any hurry to leave the Ropers. By this time the 'county' had made up its mind to receive the Delmars. There was many reasons for this. One was, that, like other places, East Elmshire, or at any rate its younger inhabitants, had a keen eye to their own advantage. Having once ascertained that the tenants of Crane Court desired nothing better than to entertain to an extent few people could afford to do in that part of the world, East Elmshire decided to allow itself to be entertained.

Then, too, the Eastanleys and the Digbys had taken up the Delmars, and Mr Mortimer himself was known to be on the most friendly terms with them. And when these three families had extended the right hand of fellowship, who could hold themselves aloof? The county discovered it was only amused, not disgusted, by Mrs Delmar, who was the soul of good-nature,—that Mr

Delmar was a good, sensible man, and sound Tory, who could not help savouring a little of the City; that Madeline was a very charming, unaffected girl, unspoiled by the atmosphere of wealth in which she had been reared; and that Owen was decidedly a man to be known, in spite of his Radical proclivities.

So Mrs Delmar's heart waxed glad within her, though she found it very hard to forgive Madeline for refusing Ted Calverley. Since that event, the Eastanleys had all been in town, and nothing had been seen of Ted in East Elmshire. Even his father could not desire him to remain in the neighbourhood of the girl who had rejected him. Rumours were heard from time to time that he was returning to his old ways, and had been seen at all the early race meetings.

Mr Delmar was getting more and more enchanted with Crane Court. He even went once or twice to the length of throwing out a feeler to discover if Mortimer felt disposed to sell it. Mr Delmar cherished a belief that a poor man ought to sell anything for which he could get a sufficiently high price, especially a great place in which he could not afford to live. This was common sense, but not a view a Mortimer was likely to entertain. Once Mr Delmar went to the length of asking whether the place was entailed.

'I am the heir of entail,' replied Mortimer.

'Then you could sell it if you chose. Not but that you could sell it anyhow, under Lord Cairns' Act.'

'Yes, I could sell Crane Court, if I chose, but I hope not to be reduced to that just yet,' replied Mortimer positively, and Mr Delmar did not press the point. But he meant at some future time to give a hint that if the place

were in the market, he would be prepared to give a fair price for it.

Geoffrey did not tell him how this thing—the dread that the time might come when he would be obliged to sell his home—haunted him like a nightmare. It would half break his heart. But would it be right to leave Fidge this vast encumbered inheritance,—this home in which he could not afford to live,—this burden under which he himself groaned? It might not always be possible to find tenants for Crane Court, and then? Mr Delmar's words sent a shiver of apprehension through him. As he listened to Fidge's merry chatter, he asked himself, could it be that even that mighty sacrifice would be demanded for his son's sake?

If those of the dead and gone Mortimers who lived royally, and feasted, and hunted, and spent just a little more than their incomes to keep up the state they imagined was demanded of them, could have seen the weary perplexity in their descendant's mind as he sat by his fireside at the Farm, or strode over the broad acres that had been theirs, and were now his, would they have abated somewhat of their lavish hospitality and free expenditure? Probably not. They had a good time while they lived, and sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. It was Geoffrey's misfortune that, with as keen capacity for enjoyment as they, he had been born in that evil day—with a conscience.

'To have a will and a conscience,' says the author of 'A Nile Novel,' 'means chiefly to possess the power, amid the world's wild struggle, of enforcing one's own decisions against one's self.' This, though he never put it in such words, was precisely Geoffrey Mortimer's decision.

Otherwise, apart from the vexed question of ways and means, and the eternal ache his exile from Crane Court

cost him, these spring days were full of a rich promise of happiness for him, though he was slow to believe it possible Madeline Delmar could care for him, and fearful of putting his fate to the test. She would have to give up so much should she become his wife, that he was naturally shy of asking her. She was the daughter of a millionaire and he could never be anything but a poor man.

But it was not possible to go on much longer as he was doing. Every day Margaret was more and more missed, and he felt the imperative need of someone to look after Fidge and the whole household. Yet, when Mrs Digby urged him to look out for some capable and trustworthy housekeeper, he displayed an unaccountable reluctance, the cause of which that good lady was far from guessing. People had become so accustomed to Mortimer as a confirmed widower, that they had given up all thoughts of his second marriage. He had entered upon the responsibilities of life so early, that few people realised how young he still was.

He was young enough to be very much in love indeed, and to spend a good many hours thinking of fair Madeline Delmar. A year ago he would have deemed such a thing impossible, but it had come to pass, nevertheless, and with his love had come a strange, feverish restlessness which had a good deal in common with the vague stirrings of spring in the air, the rising sap in the tree trunks, and the exulting songs of the birds.

It was to think of Madeline more comfortably that he lighted his pipe one afternoon and sat down on a fallen tree by one of the broad hedgerows by which all that country was intersected. It had been cut down and stripped of its bark—'rhined' as the natives called

it—and now lay, a gigantic naked skeleton, stretching its gaunt limbs up among the branches of its living fellows, already green with budding foliage. At his feet were masses of primroses and dog violets and starlike anemones, and his eyes rested with unconscious pleasure on the delicate beauty afforded by the contrast of a young larch tree, a very emblem of graceful loveliness, with a dark yew, with its rugged, twisted trunk and dingy foliage.

It was warm and sunny, the very ideal of a spring afternoon, fraught with present loveliness and promise of still greater beauty. Even the mournful memories of a dead year were made gracious, for the very blossoms at his feet had come up through the withered leaves of the previous autumn, and their delicate tints looked all the lovelier for this grey setting. It was the very afternoon to dream of love, and this was exactly what Geoffrey Mortimer proceeded to do.

Not all the beauty around him could fill him with content. His life was empty and incomplete, and needed its fulfilment. His heart ached with unsatisfied longing. A year ago he would have called this sentimental folly, but he could not now put it away from him. Far off in the woodlands, clear above the soft cooing of the wood-pigeons, and the many notes of the singing birds, all of them familiar to him, came the call of a cuckoo. It had an indefinable accent of hope in it, and Mortimer felt inspired. Had Madeline come by that moment, he would have told her his story.

But she did not come, she was at Daltons with Owen, and Mortimer sat lost in thought so long and so still that presently an adventurous squirrel ran along the ground close to him, and then scuttled up a tree a few yards from

where he sat, and, perched on a branch, looked down at him with bright-eyed wonder. Old Rollo, rejoicing in the warm sunshine, had gone off into the deep sleep of age at his master's feet.

'Yes, old fellow!' said the Squire to him, rising at last, and finding that his pipe had gone out, 'it must be; I must try it, but I shouldn't wonder if she says "No;" and what shall we do then?'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MADELINE DELMAR went to Daltons without having any suspicion of the attraction that drew her brother there. She supposed his intention in going must be to show Gertie he did not bear malice for her incautious remarks, and he did not enlighten her. After sitting a few moments in the drawing-room, Owen and Gertrude disappeared out of the French window, he having asked to see the lame hunter, leaving Madeline talking to Mrs Digby, who was instructing her in a new pattern of knitting.

They went straight to the stables, which Gertrude could remember in her childhood full of horses, but which were now half empty. Her hunter was in a roomy loose box, and Owen proceeded at once to examine him carefully. He said nothing when he had finished, until Gertie asked anxiously,—

'What do you think of him, Mr Delmar?'

'I'm afraid it's a bad case,' he answered. 'With care, he might recover sufficiently to be used in harness, but I don't think you will ever be able to hunt him again.'

Her eyes grew dim.

'I was afraid so,' she said. 'He will have to be shot; we don't want another carriage horse.'

'It's a great bore, but you will have another hunter.'

'No, I sha'n't. Papa says he can't afford to buy me another horse. I shall have to go without in future,' she answered, patting her old favourite's soft neck, and laying her cheek against it for a moment.

It made a pretty picture, and Owen thoroughly appreciated it. A gleam of sunshine came through a window high up in the wall, and fell on the girl's brilliant hair, the horse's glossy coat, and the yellow straw on which they stood. A look of melancholy gave a fresh charm to Gertrude's beauty.

Presently she turned away, and, shutting the loose box, said,—

'I suppose we had better go in again.'

'No, not yet,' he answered. 'I have five hundred things to say to you.'

'Have you, Mr Delmar? That's a good many.'

'I will say one, to begin with. Why do you always pretend you hate me so?'

She raised her eyebrows.

'*Pretend*, Mr Delmar! of course, I do hate you.'

'Very much?' he said, looking at her steadily.

Beneath his gaze she blushed and faltered, as she answered,—

'Yes, very much indeed.'

'Tell me,' he asked, coming a little nearer, 'do you hate me more than you have ever hated anyone else?'

Gertrude would have given worlds to run away, but the magnetism of his eyes was upon her, and she answered vehemently,—

'Yes, I hate you far more than I ever hated anyone in my life.'

'You are sure you never felt for anyone as you do for me?'

'Yes, quite sure!' she replied. 'Oh, please let me go.'

But he caught her trembling form in his arms, and drew her to him, and kissed her blushing face, once, long and lovingly. And after the first second she did not resist, but lay in his arms quiet, but trembling very much, captured at last.

'Only promise you will hate me as you do now all the rest of our lives!' he cried. 'Oh, Gertie, I have loved you all along! You wretched little girl, what a life you have led me!'

'It was your own fault. And you mustn't call me a wretched little girl!' she gasped. 'You mustn't do this. I don't—love you!'

'No, no, you hate me. Oh, Gertie! I have been so miserable, for I thought your Digby pride would never let you marry me.'

'Certainly I never thought I should come to this!' she murmured.

'No, you poor child, I don't expect you ever did! Never fear! I will make our name one you shall be proud of.'

'Will you? But I never said I would marry you.'

'But you are going to—some day. Gertie, I would wait for you as long as Jacob did for Rachel.'

'That was fourteen years, wasn't it? Very well, then perhaps I will marry you this day fourteen years.'

'That's settled then!'

And once more drawing her to him, for she had shyly retreated a little, he kissed her again, first her face, and then

the rich masses of her hair. She gave a little low, not ill-pleased laugh.

'Fancy kissing my carrots!' she said.

'Carrots!' he exclaimed, horrified. 'Don't you know that your hair is perfectly lovely? It is your great beauty, Gertie.'

'Now I *know* you are talking nonsense! My red hair beautiful, indeed!'

'But it is lovely. It is just the colour Titian always painted. When we are married—'

'Fourteen years hence!' she interposed.

'Yes, fourteen years hence, I will take you to Venice, and show you hair just like yours in Titian's best pictures.'

They were still in the stables, with the horses munching their corn around them, quite oblivious of the little scene being enacted close by. A sound of steps outside, suggestive of a groom approaching, caused the two lovers to start apart, but the steps passed by.

'We must go in,' said Gertrude nervously. 'They will wonder what has become of us!'

He took her two hands in his, and let his eyes dwell on her face, with that look of intense love that made her cheeks glow, and her eyelids droop, and her heart beat wildly.

'Look at me, Gertrude, and tell me once more how you —hate me?' he said, in a low voice.

And she, who loved him with all the force of her nature, tried to look at him, but could not. Instead, she hid her blushing face on his shoulder, and throwing her arms round him, cried tremulously,—

'Oh, Owen, don't make me tell you! But I do hate you so awfully, I don't know what to do.'

After that they went back to the drawing-room, where

Mrs Digby and Madeline, still engaged on the mysteries of the knitting pattern, had not noticed their prolonged absence, or, if they had, had merely attributed it to the absorbing interests of the stables. Tea was brought up, and Gertrude proceeded to dispense it, and nothing unusual either in her manner or Owen's drew attention to them. Only Gertie knew of the extra pressure he gave her hand as he wished her good-bye. He amused himself all the way home teasing poor Madeline in true fraternal style, and she had no more idea he was a triumphant and accepted lover than she had had that wet November evening that he was a rejected one.

So, after all, Owen Delmar had gained his heart's desire and fulfilled the prediction he had made long ago. But he had hardly room for triumph, or self-congratulation, in the joy that filled even his restless soul with a great peace. Gertrude had been so nearly lost to him. He had, in fact, arrived at the point of making up his mind she was lost, and now his happiness was all the greater by contrast with his former despair.

Next morning he rode over to Daltons for his interview with Mr Digby. He had not much apprehension about its results. Owen possessed a considerable private fortune of his own, and Mr Digby had felt the sting of poverty enough to regard wealth as one of the chief desiderata of his daughter's happiness. He might have wished for a son-in-law of more aristocrat extraction than a Delmar, but he had sense enough not to object to the marriage on this score. Owen himself was a perfect gentleman, and Mr Digby foresaw that he would make his name a celebrated one in time. Besides, Gertrude loved him, and when one has a large family and limited means, with an

old place to keep up, it is really a great mercy to get one's eldest daughter comfortably married and off one's hands, even though her husband be a Radical and the son of a parvenu.

So Owen's interview with his future father-in-law went off very satisfactorily. In fact, when a hint about settlements was let fall, Mr Digby inwardly sighed with envy at the lot of those whose means were totally unencumbered by the expenses of property. And then, as her acknowledged lover and future husband, Owen went in search of Gertie, and they spent most of the rest of that day together.

They were an odd pair, for they quarrelled, and teased each other quite as much as they made love in the more orthodox way. Even Owen hardly knew how much Gertrude loved him, or the extent of the fascination he exercised over her. He was so completely her master—this plain, insignificant young man, who could only date his ancestry back a couple of generations. And she had never been subjugated before. Her self-will had often been the cause of grief to her gentle little mother. But Owen was her master. She had a strange feeling that, struggle as she might, he would always get his own way, and a still stranger feeling that she did not at all mind this state of things.

Though she would never say more than that she hated him, and though she was always struggling to prevent him from finding it out, she loved him passionately, and every day of their engagement her love increased. There was such infinite variety in his character—he was never the same two days running—it was so impossible to tell beforehand what he would be like, that she could

never get tired of him, only be fascinated afresh every time. And withal he was so brilliantly clever, that she admired him as much as she loved him. With a humility completely at variance with her usual character, she marvelled what so gifted a man could find to love in her.

'How we shall fight when we are married, fourteen years hence!' she said.

'Shall we? That will be something to look forward to. What shall we fight about?'

'Why, Owen, we never do anything else! To begin with, you are such a Radical, and I hate Radicals. Don't you think you had better change your opinions—we should agree so much better.'

He laughed gaily.

'If anyone is to change, it won't be me, Gertie. No, we had better agree to differ on that point.'

'We shall differ on so many, I'm afraid. I wonder if you will bully me very much when we are married?'

'Of course I shall, horribly. I shall bully you, and sit upon you, and make your life a burden to you in a general way. You must thoroughly make up your mind to that.'

'It will be horrid.'

'It will be very good for you. You have bullied me hitherto.'

'I don't think you cared much.'

'Didn't I? That was lucky—you were very hard-hearted. But I always meant to make you care for me, and I have succeeded!'

'Don't crow over me, Owen, or I shall go away!'

'Crow over you! My dear one, I don't mean to do

that!' he cried tenderly, coming close to where she sat. And she did not carry out her threat. But their love-making was diversified by many small quarrels—mere ripples on the surface of their deep mutual affection.

The amazement with which the news of Owen's engagement was received at Crane Court was absolutely boundless.

'But I thought you and Gertrude always hated each other with a mighty hatred,' said Madeline.

'So we do, but we think we shall be able to hate each other so much more comfortably when we are married. I have meant to marry her for a long time. Will it astonish you to hear that I proposed to her and was refused last November, just before I went up to Greatmills for my election?'

Madeline was utterly amazed. Owen had kept his secret so well.

'Well, Owen, you are a most extraordinary man!' was all she said, however. 'But how could Gertrude Digby make up her mind to marry a Delmar?'

He laughed.

'You must try to forget that little episode, Maidie. I have forgotten it long ago. You see,' he added, with a happy smile, 'we do wonderful things when we are in love, as you will find some day.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TWENTY-FOUR hours' continuous rain—not heavy enough, however, to keep Owen Delmar away from Daltons—was succeeded by a gloriously fine morning, and Madeline went out in the garden to enjoy all the fresh beauty, and note how rapidly the flowers were coming out. The air was quite heavy with the scent of the wallflowers, whose brown and yellow blossoms were fast opening to the sunshine, and the hyacinths, tulips, and anemones were looking their brightest. For years new bulbs had been far too expensive a luxury for the Crane Court garden-beds, but now they looked as gay as any in East Elmshire, and the gardener complacently remarked to Miss Delmar, as she commented on their beauty, that now the place was beginning to look a little more as it should.

Madeline gave her invariable reply to remarks of this sort, that it never could look anything but lovely, and then passed on to a spot she loved still better than the parterre of beds. It was a long walk, winding through a shrubbery of rhododendrons and other flowering shrubs, with a border full of all sorts of common herbaceous plants, which had grown and flourished there for many a long

year. In the early spring there were snowdrops, and Lent lilies, and aconite, and now it was gay with different coloured primroses, and double wallflower, and crown imperials, and great clumps of poet's narcissus. Wild-flowers were mixed with the garden ones, and ferns began to show their fronds, still brown and closely curled up. The gardeners had not interfered much with this part of the premises, except to keep weeds away.

As she moved along, Madeline gathered herself a little bouquet of some of the sweeter blossoms, and put it in the front of her dress, thinking mournfully as she did so that in a very short time she would have to accompany her parents to London for the season, or at least a portion of it, and leave all this spring loveliness behind. There was not one single reason which made her wish to go, but it would have to be, all the same. Mrs Delmar had no intention of spending all the year immured in the country.

The shrubbery walk was a frequent haunt of Madeline's, therefore she was not surprised when she saw Fidge Mortimer coming running towards her, though she was more astonished when she saw he was followed, at a soberer pace, by his father. The child made a rush directly he descried her, and half smothered her in one of his headlong embraces. They still had their arms round each other, and were exchanging kisses, when Mortimer came up.

'My Maidie!' Fidge was saying, 'I could not come to see you yesterday, because it was so horribly wet.'

'No, I did not expect you. I did not go out all day. Did you?'

'No, but Dad did, and I wanted to go with him, but

he says I must grow quite big before I may go out in the rain. But I made him play with me, and we talked about you. We often talk about you, you know. Oh, isn't that Mr O.o. riding across the park?'

And Fidge was off like a small whirlwind, leaving Maidie to shake hands with his father.

Having once obtained possession of her hand, Mortimer did not let it go.

'Do you know I am horribly jealous, sometimes, of you and Fidge?' he said, looking down at her.

'Oh, Mr Mortimer, that would be absurd, if you meant it,' she answered, making an ineffectual effort to free her hand. 'As if Fidge could ever care for me half as much as he does for you!'

'I did not mean jealous in that way,' said Mortimer. 'I am not afraid of that. But I very often am afraid that you like him more than me!'

'Mr Mortimer!'

'Miss Delmar, don't you think you might allow the father the same privileges as the son? I don't at all like standing by and seeing Fidge allowed to kiss you as much as he likes—the young rascal!—and then to be only permitted a distant handshake.'

'Oh, Mr Mortimer!' ejaculated Madeline again, in a tone of utter amazement. She had begun to form quite a different estimate of his character lately, and to discover he was by no means always the stately personage she had at first imagined him, but could be very young and frivolous sometimes. But this was really carrying frivolity a little too far, and she did not like it. It might have been nothing in another man, but it hurt her that Mr Mortimer should descend to talking nonsense of this sort.

He saw she was annoyed, and his courage failed him. But he had gone too far now to draw back. He loosened, however, the firm clasp of her hand, and she promptly drew it away, and retreated a step, still looking at him with reproach in her eyes. Just at this moment, the note of a cuckoo, with its indefinable message of hope, sounded softly and clearly from a coppice not far off, just as he had heard it as he sat thinking of Madeline a day or two previously. He accepted the omen, and took heart again.

'Indeed, I mean what I say,' he said, in a low, earnest voice, with an accent in it that was new to Madeline. 'I would give anything to have a little of the love you bestow so freely on my son; I have loved you for some time now, but I never had the courage to tell you so before. I know I am not at all the sort of fellow you would have naturally chosen for a husband. To begin with, I am as poor as a rat, but no man could possibly love you better than I do. I don't feel as if I could possibly live without you any longer, and yet I have so little, so very little, except my love, to offer you. Oh, Maidie! if you will be my wife, I will try to make you happy. My darling, can it be possible you love me a little?'

Something he read in her blushing, downcast face prompted these last few words. And just at this moment. the cuckoo burst into a perfect ecstasy of song.

A few minutes later, Fidge came running along to inform his father he was going to the stables with Owen. But what he saw caused him to pause open-mouthed for one second, and then to fly off like lightning back to Owen again.

'Oh, what *do* you think!' he exclaimed breathlessly, at the top of his voice. 'Dad and Maidie are sitting on

the seat in the shrubbery, and he has got his arms right round her, and her head was down on his shoulder; and I am sure, yes, I am quite sure, he was *kissing* her ever so much!'

Owen indulged in a low whistle.

'Sits the wind in that quarter?' he thought. 'Engagements, like other misfortunes, never come singly. Did they see you?' he asked aloud.

'No, I don't think so. Do you know, Dad never would kiss her before. I asked him to once, but he said he didn't think she would like it.'

'Ah, I suppose he has found out she doesn't much mind. Now look here, youngster, I shouldn't say anything about this to anybody else, if I were you. We'll keep it a secret between you and me.'

'Is it a real secret?' asked Fidge. 'I like secrets.'

'Yes, it's a real secret,' answered Owen, and he good-naturedly took Fidge off, and kept him amused for another hour or so, from which it will be seen that fellow-feeling made him wondrous kind.

But Fidge had not been quite so unseen to the pair on the garden seat in the shrubbery as he imagined. It is true they had not noticed his arrival, but the sound of his retreating footsteps caused them both to look up just in time to descry the small figure in the grey suit and sailor hat disappearing down the path at lightning speed.

'That was Fidge!' said Maidie, in a low, horror-struck voice. 'Do you think he can have seen us?'

'Probably,' answered Geoffrey. 'Bother that boy, he has a happy knack of being in the wrong place.'

'And of saying the wrong thing. He has made some fearful remarks in his time.'

'When he asked me why I didn't kiss you, for instance. Do you know, my Maidie darling, it was then I first found out how much I loved you, for I discovered I should have liked to kiss you very much. Fidge was wiser in his generation than I. Well, if he did see us, it is probably all over the place by this time, and I had better go in and look for Mr Delmar. What will he say, I wonder? I am horribly poor, you know.'

'Are you, Dad? I don't mind one little bit. I don't think being rich makes one any happier.'

He shook his head with a smile.

'Ah, my dear, I can't quite say that. I know being poor has cost me a good deal. But it is sweet of you to say you do not fear it. And tell me, my darling, don't you mind the existence of Fidge, or —anything?'

She perfectly understood him to refer to the fact of his being a widower. In the fulness of her new joy, what could she answer but—

'No; I mind nothing, so long as I know you love me.'

Then they walked up to the house together, and Madeline went to see if her father were at home, and, if so, to prepare him a little for what Mortimer had to say. It was with perfect truth that Geoffrey said he dreaded the interview, and much feared what Mr Delmar might say to him. His means were very crippled, and there was no disguising the fact that he was very poor. Anyone might have considered him so, much more a millionaire like Mr Delmar.

But he found he had no cause for his apprehensions. Mr Delmar rated his only daughter's happiness far above worldly considerations, and he said he knew no man to

whom he could trust her with more perfect confidence than to Geoffrey Mortimer. He did not say, but he thought, that Mortimer's splendid old name and high position amply atoned for any lack of wealth. As for poverty, he philosophically remarked that it did not hurt young people to be a little badly off when they began life. He and his wife had not been at all rich when they married, but they had been very happy, and had enjoyed their wealth all the more when it came. Madeline was quite old enough to know her own mind, and to choose for herself.

And then he mentioned the sum he intended to settle on his daughter at her marriage. It rather took Mortimer's breath away. He had never thought about any money Madeline might bring him. To begin with, he knew she had none of her own. He had loved her too so purely and entirely for her own sake, that no thought of filthy lucre had entered his imagination. But Mr Delmar seemed to think the amount he named nothing out of the common, and, in truth, it was not as much as most people would have expected so wealthy a man to bestow on his only daughter. And Mortimer wisely reflected it would enable him to supply her with many small comforts and luxuries to which she had been accustomed, and which she might otherwise have had to miss.

The Delmars looked upon Madeline's choice of a husband with unmixed satisfaction. To be Mrs Mortimer of Crane Court quite fulfilled all their hopes for her. Had she married Ted Calverley she would have been connected with the aristocracy, but then not only was there every reason to doubt Ted's steadiness—and they loved their daughter too well to wish to see her married to a

rake—but they had the sense to know the position of Geoffrey Mortimer's wife in East Elmshire would have a solidity that of the Honourable Mrs Ted Calverley might lack. They were quite ready to receive Mortimer with open arms. In fact, Maidie secretly wondered how he would stand their effusive welcome. But in the case of her parents, Mortimer's large nature had long learned to look below the surface, and find out the true metal there.

Owen could not resist letting her know, when Geoffrey had at length betaken himself off that day, what Fidge had told him he had witnessed in the shrubbery. This reward he felt he might permit himself for his discretion in silencing the child, and keeping his own counsel in public.

'It's all very well for you to laugh,' said Maidie, blushing rosy red at his teasing. 'You and Gertie probably do just the same, only—'

'Only we are too wise to be found out, eh?' he laughed. 'I tell you what, I should gag that youth if I were you. How will you like having a step-son?'

'Very much indeed. I love Fidge dearly.'

'And how will you like being badly off, and living in a farm? You will have to alter some of your extravagant ideas, my dear.'

'I have none,' she replied calmly. 'But, Owen, I want to tell you something. Geoffrey must not know about Aunt Louisa's money before we are married. He has not a notion now. I made papa promise to say nothing about it. He is already disgusted at the amount papa means to give me, and I really believe, if he found I was to have all that money, he would decline to marry me.

He is so awfully proud. Promise you won't let the faintest hint drop, Owen dear.'

'Oh yes, I promise solemnly. I certainly won't have the breaking-off of your engagement to such a very desirable man on my conscience. He's an awfully good chap, and you are admirably suited for each other; though I can't imagine why you didn't settle all this ages ago. I say, Maidie, you and I are doing fairly well for ourselves in East Elmshire, in spite of our soapy antecedents. You are going to marry a Mortimer, and I a Digby.'

So it was a happy dream that Geoffrey Mortimer indulged in by his solitary fireside after Fidge had gone to bed that night. He was fairly surprised at the capacities for happiness left in him. Soon he would be solitary no longer, and all these long dreary years would be as a dream. To-night he could let all the old memories come unmolested if they chose. He did not shrink even from recalling Nellie's sweet face and loving eyes. Her pure spirit would rejoice in his happiness.

But it was far more of the future than of the past he thought—that future which now showed so golden and bright before him. Henceforth he would have someone to share his joys and his sorrows. He had experienced the extremest loneliness, and he would well know how to appreciate a loving companionship. A year ago, how little he imagined that life held for him any such possibility of happiness as had now come to him. Knowing so well what a happy married life could be, he knew what lay before him, and as he thought of it, the Squire's honest face grew soft, and his lips curved in a blissful smile.

He who had sat there alone so often with his ghosts, was now face to face with a vision of perfect happiness,

and a deep contentment filled the heart that had ached so frequently with regret and loneliness.

'My Maidie darling.' Fidge's name for her, which he now had a perfect right to use. Very sweet it sounded as he murmured it softly to himself, as he did more than once that evening.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IT was arranged that Madeline's marriage to Mr Mortimer should take place about two months after their engagement. There was no reason for a longer delay. Rather to the dismay of the happy couple, Mrs Delmar insisted on carrying out her plan of going to London for at least six weeks. She had now the additional reason to allege of the necessity of procuring Madeline's trousseau. Geoffrey Mortimer was welcome to come and stay with them in their London house as often, and for as long as he liked.

But he knew he could not be away much from his farm and his son, and this early parting was a blow to both him and Maidie. Each had discovered the utter impossibility of living without the other. However, the parting would not be for so very long, and after that they would be united for evermore.

As for the other engaged pair, their wedding was fixed for about a month later. Of course, Owen settled it. Gertrude persisted in talking about 'fourteen years hence,' until one day he quietly remarked that was rather absurd; supposing they said fourteen weeks instead? And so, in spite of her pretended protests, their marriage day was

settled just fourteen weeks after that day when they went to the stables to inspect the lame hunter. By that time Owen might reasonably hope the labours of the session would be over, and he might be free to take his bride the prolonged honeymoon abroad they contemplated.

They too were apart for a portion of their engagement, as he was obliged to return to London and his busy life. But Gertrude too had to purchase a trousseau, and gladly accepted an invitation to stay with an aunt in town for that purpose. After that she went to the Delmars in Grosvenor Gardens for a little.

She was very happy, in spite of the sad fact that she was about to marry a Delmar and a Radical. Not only was she intensely in love with her brilliant future husband, but also the prospect of a gay London life, with plenty of money to spend, was very pleasing to her. Owen's fortune seemed to her magnificent. He was very generous, and constantly bought her lovely presents.

But when her relations and friends pronounced she could only be marrying such a man for his money, they were quite in the wrong, as we know. The man himself was not bad, they admitted. He knew how to behave like a gentleman, and he was undoubtedly very clever—clever enough to dazzle any girl—but then, his people! How could she, a Digby of Daltons, consent to marry the son of a soap-boiler? Could she not have found someone, equally well off, in her own position of life? To all which hints and queries Gertrude turned a deaf ear, or merely replied that she was not peculiar in her tastes, since Geoffrey Mortimer of Crane Court, the representative of the oldest house in Elmshire, was about to wed Owen Delmar's sister. Whereat the friends and

relations only shook their heads and murmured 'Money too!' But no one ever ventured a suggestion of this sort to Mortimer himself.

Owen and Gertrude quarrelled quite as much as they made love. Sometimes he teased her past endurance, and then she would fire up and get angry with him, until he soothed her, as he well knew how, back to amiability again. Sometimes he would come to her worn out physically and mentally with the wear and tear of his feverish, intellectual life, too tired even to talk, and then the petting would be on her side. But always, in whatever mood he came, she felt she only lived to be with him.

Nothing of this sort took place with Geoffrey and Madeline. The steady sweetness of their lovemaking would have tired the other pair in a week. They were far the most evidently affectionate of the two couples, and there never was an approach to a quarrel between them.

It cannot be said, however, that no cloud ever dimmed the brightness of their happiness, at least as far as Maidie was concerned. She despised herself, and called herself hard names for it, but between her and the perfection of her bliss would come the thought of Geoffrey's dead young wife. It was only a second love—perhaps only a secondary love—that he could give her. He told her he loved her as much as it was possible to love, but she could not be sure he had not once loved Nellie more. What if, when they were married, she failed to satisfy him, and he compared her invidiously with that fair, dead girl?

Now and then thoughts such as these rose up to torment her. Had she loved Mortimer a little less, she

would not have cared so much. But she was so devoted to him, that she could not, school herself as she would, help being a little jealous of the woman he had once loved so dearly. Then she would strive to comfort herself with the reflection that she would far sooner have his love, even though it had once been given in fuller measure elsewhere, than the whole undivided affection of any other man.

Geoffrey was aware of her dislike of the fact that he had been married before. It half amused and half vexed him, but he supposed it must always be so with a girl who married a widower. Nor could he explain to her that that love for his dead wife had nothing whatever to do with his love for her. The one neither weakened nor destroyed the other. When she was his wife, he might be able to make it plain to her. Sometimes she questioned him about Nellie, and then he answered her freely and fully. But he was far too true a man ever to pretend he had not adored his young wife, or to hint to Madeline that he loved her better than he had Nellie. He never even told her he loved her as well, for he never compared the two. He only said he loved her with all his heart, better than anyone else on earth.

Had he had any doubt about Madeline's feelings on this subject, it would have been put an end to by one conversation between them, which, beginning gaily enough, ended rather mournfully. It took place in London. Mortimer had come up to stay with the Delmars, leaving Fidge at Daltons, and his farm to take care of itself. Mrs Delmar was beginning to make arrangements for the wedding, and to write out lists of the guests. Crane Court was to be filled to overflowing with the Delmar friends and relations. The wedding was to be a very

grand affair. Both Mortimer and Maidie would have, for different reasons, infinitely preferred a quiet one, but Madeline saw this would annoy her parents, and so gave way to them, and Geoffrey was ready to yield to her. But he had an irrepressible shrinking from appearing as one of the chief figures in a grand ceremonial, which must take place in the little country church where he had worshipped all his life.

Madeline dreaded the grand wedding for another reason. She could not imagine how the Mortimer relations, connections, and friends would amalgamate with those of the Delmars. She felt the entertainment would be not unlike the second Mrs Dombey's dinner-parties. And she did not know what Geoffrey's feelings might be when he saw the whole Delmar clan assembled, and in festal array. She was so acutely conscious herself of the difference between them and the people he had been accustomed to associate with.

She tried to prepare him a little. He was quite ready to agree that the wedding would be an awful trial on many accounts.

Owen happened one day to come into the room where they were. He always chaffed them a great deal about the way they 'spooned,' and he never entered a room where they might be, without various demonstrations outside the door to herald his approach.

On this occasion his caution was needless. He found them sitting quite far apart, looking extremely dejected.

'I say, what's the row?' he inquired. 'Have you quarrelled?'

'No; oh no!' answered Maidie mournfully. 'We were only thinking of our wedding day!'

Owen was much amused.

'It seems to have an exceedingly depressing effect on you!' he said.

'Can you wonder, O.o. Won't it be too dreadful? If you think seriously for a moment, you will see it must.'

A glance of intelligence passed between brother and sister, and Owen smiled to himself as he pictured the phalanx of Delmar relatives in full glory.

'A man looks such a fool being married,' muttered Geoffrey sadly.

'Oh, how thankful I shall be when it's well over!' exclaimed Madeline. Then she thoughtlessly added, 'One comfort is, one can only have to go through it all once in one's life!'

'Ah, but I have had to do it all before!' ejaculated Geoffrey naïvely.

Owen laughed outright.

'Poor chap!' he said. 'You two are the funniest pair I ever saw. I think, if you are so amusing, I shall bestow more of my company on you!'

'No, we don't want you, Owen, for you only laugh at us. So go away to your Gertie, and don't bother us. I expect you two are a great deal more ridiculous, if one only knew it!'

Possibly, but you haven't detected us, you see.'

When Owen was gone, which was not until he had teased them a little longer, Mortimer came over to Maidie, and, sitting down on the sofa by her, he first removed her work from her hands, and then, taking possession of them himself, drew her to him. Then began one of those love scenes more easily imagined than described. But deep down in the girl's heart there must have been some

thought which caused her to say rather abruptly, after Geoffrey had been assuring her of his great love,—

'Do you think we shall really be happy together, Dad?' She often called him by Fidge's name for him.

'I have no doubts, my darling. Why, not only do we know each other so well, and love each other so much, but we have so many tastes in common. My sweet, I truly think we are made for each other.'

'But, Geoffrey,' she spoke hesitatingly, and played nervously with the buttons of his coat, 'you loved—her, and were very happy then.'

'Yes, I did love Nellie very much, and we were perfectly happy together. But what of that, my Maidie? That does not interfere with my love for you?'

'No, but—you say we are made for each other, and I know I couldn't help falling in love with you. Supposing she had lived, and yet we had met?'

'Oh, that would have been altogether different,' he said quietly. 'Of course, if Nellie had been living, you would only have known me as a married man, and I—well, we should never have thought of each other in that way at all.'

'It is strange to think such a thing possible,' said Madeline. Then, very unwisely pursuing the strain of ideas, she went on, still intently gazing at the button she was twisting. 'Suppose, Geoffrey, you and I had met long ago, before you were ever married at all.'

'My dear, you must then have been in the schoolroom, not to say the nursery.'

'No; I mean, if I had been grown-up. Oh, Geoffrey, if you had then met Nellie and me at the same time, what would have happened?'

'Why try to work out such a problem, Maidie?'

'I want to know, Geoffrey; what would have happened?'

'How can I tell?' he replied, much perplexed. 'I am afraid you will not like it if I try to solve the problem. For you know I fell in love with Nellie—I was young then—the very first instant I saw her, whereas— Oh, my darling! why would you propound such a problem?'

For Madeline had put her head down on his shoulder, and quietly burst into tears. She had brought this on herself, she knew, and devoutly she now wished she had not pushed her questioning so far.

Geoffrey soothed and comforted her as best he might, a little annoyed with himself for his frankness, and with her for pressing him so far, and yet secretly somewhat amused. Her grief was so very unnecessary. Had there never been a Nellie in his life, he knew he could not love her more than he did. He told her this, and it made her a little happier. But he felt he never would be able to make her understand till they were married.

It may be added that Mortimer's patient confidence had its reward. When Madeline became his wife, and grasped more thoroughly the strength and depth of his love for her—when she saw how perfectly contented he was—she insensibly forgot to think at all about that dead girl, still less be jealous of her. Geoffrey loved her as truly as a husband could love a wife. There could be no room in her heart for regret or jealousy.

And Geoffrey, though he never said so to her, and probably never realised it himself, grew to love her as the years went on, each one making them more and more to each other, as he had never loved Nellie in those old

sweet, brief days, when they had been little more than boy and girl together. Between himself and Madeline there was such perfect conformity of taste, she loved him so deeply, and he was of such an intensely affectionate nature, that this was but natural. And by the time they had been married a year, Madeline simply never thought of Nellie at all, one way or another, and the problem that had once vexed her so keenly was entirely forgotten.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE time has come to take leave of our East Elmshire friends. We can do so, as all stories should end, to the sound of wedding-bells. Geoffrey Mortimer and Madeline were duly married in the little Craneham Church, which was far too small to hold all the villagers who wished to see their Squire married, as well as the goodly assembly of guests.

The wedding was quite as awful as Madeline had anticipated. Crane Court was filled to overflowing with the Delmar clan, who appeared most gorgeously attired, and radiant with delight at the distinguished marriage Madeline was making. They had not the Vere de Vere repose, and their joy was plainly visible. Besides which, they considered a wedding a fitting occasion for the display of any amount of hilarity. They were ready to be friendly with anyone, particularly the bridegroom, with whose good looks and stately carriage they were much impressed.

Stately he certainly was. Madeline felt him growing more and more dignified and distantly calm in his manner, as he replied to their congratulations, and civilly smiled at their jokes. She knew this accession of stateliness was

perfectly involuntary on his part, and that he was probably unconscious of it himself, but it almost had the effect of reviving some of her alarm of him. Only she knew, and did not wonder at, its cause.

The Delmar tribe did not amalgamate with the Digbys, and the rest of the Mortimer relations and friends, just as the bride had foreseen. The latter considered the former 'awful,' but Madeline's grace and beauty dispersed any wonder they might have felt at the alliance Geoffrey was making. After all, they remarked, a man raises his wife to his own level—whatever she had been, the parvenu's daughter was now a Mortimer. And Maidie's gentle simplicity disarmed all criticism. Moreover, was it not rumoured that she had refused Ted Calverley?

One person thoroughly enjoyed himself at the wedding. That was little Fidge, who wore a large white button-hole, and was made much of by everyone, Mortimers and Delmars alike. He most thoroughly approved of the arrangement that was to effect what he had so often longed for, and establish his darling Maidie for a permanency at the Farm. He was as happy as a small boy could be, and immensely admiring of Madeline in her long, rich white gown, her flowing veil, and orange blossoms. He was to remain at Crane Court while the happy pair were away for their honeymoon. Mrs Delmar had begged to be allowed to have him. In her warm-hearted way she already looked upon him as a grandson, and she said his presence would console her a little for the loss of her daughter. Fidge was delighted at the prospect of a month spent at his old home. It almost comforted him for the parting from Dad.

After the bride and bridegroom had driven off, Gertrude, who had been one of the bridesmaids, strolled away

from the rest of the guests with Owen. He had only run down from London the previous day, and he had to return there again directly.

'Heigho! it will be our turn next!' remarked Gertie.

'Yes, if you think you can marry me now?' he answered.

He really would not have been very much surprised if she had said she could not. Seeing with her eyes, he had felt the peculiarities of his relatives no less keenly than Madeline had done. Would not Gertrude Digby deem them too sore a trial to be borne?

She perfectly understood what he meant, and the corners of her mouth twitched a little.

'You are thinking of that green bonnet?' she said.

'The wearer of that green bonnet—was it meant to imitate a tuft of pampas grass?—is my aunt, and will be yours when we are married.'

'I can't help it, Owen. Don't look so serious. I wish she would modify her bonnets, but no doubt she is very nice.'

And she turned her face towards him, all radiant with a merry smile.

He stooped to kiss the rosy lips more than once, with a display of passionate fondness not usual in him, as he whispered very softly just the two words, 'My wife.'

At which Gertie blushed a rosy red, and murmured, with downcast eyes,—

'Not yet, Owen—not yet—but some day!'

And the green bonnet was as completely forgotten as if it had never been.

Just at that moment the church bells, which had been ringing at intervals all day, burst into a merry peal, clanging through the still summer air, making the rooks flutter,

startled, from the old elm trees, and causing the mild-eyed Alderneys grazing in the park to look up astonished, and a little injured at this unwonted disturbance of their accustomed quiet. So, to the sound of marriage bells, we may safely leave Owen Delmar and his betrothed.

But wedding chimes do not sound for everyone. It was observed that Ted Calverley, once so constant a guest at Crane Court, always a friend of Geoffrey Mortimer's, was conspicuous by his absence on the wedding day. But if people imagined him a heart-broken, rejected lover, they were much mistaken. By this time he had quite recovered any little feeling of soreness he might have had when he had learnt that Madeline had preferred Geoffrey Mortimer to him. 'She was a nice girl, but she will be much happier with him than she would ever have been with me,' he philosophically considered, 'and I am well out of the scrape. Thank Heaven it's Mortimer being married to-day, and not I!'

But to Lady Eastanley, whenever she spoke severely to him about his mode of life, his difficulties, and his escapades, which continued to be as numerous as ever, and expressed a wish that he should settle down, he would remark, with an air of graceful sadness, 'How can I, mother, when the only girl I ever really cared for wouldn't have me?' After that, what could Lady Eastanley do but pet him, and wonder at the bad taste of Miss Delmar?

. . . . . .

One small scene more, and these chronicles of sleepy East Elmshire may close.

Geoffrey and Madeline returned from their honeymoon just in time to be present at Owen's wedding. While they had been absent, Ten Acre Farm had been thoroughly done

up, and the rooms Mortimer had never made use of furnished. Only Maidie had begged that the dear old parlour should be untouched, at any rate for the present. Mortimer had wondered whether she would object to living in the little farmhouse, but she had looked at him with hurt surprise when he had suggested such an idea to her. She honestly liked the prospect. To her town-bred mind, living at a farm presented many attractions. Besides, she knew economy had been Geoffrey's one reason for leaving his home, and that alone, he would never have contemplated quitting the farm, a step which must put him to great expense. Madeline did not know a great deal about economising, but she intended to learn.

They had been perfectly, blissfully happy during their honeymoon. Not a cloud had shadowed the heaven of their felicity. Their new life had begun under the happiest auspices. Each day Madeline had become more assured of her husband's great love for her. Each day Geoffrey had discovered some fresh charm in his young wife. But Madeline was quite content when the last day of their holiday dawned, and they turned their faces once more towards East Elmshire. It would be so sweet to be at home.

When she said something of this to Geoffrey, he agreed with her, but not, it struck her, very heartily. All that day a cloud seemed to hang over him, increasing as they approached Craneham. His gaiety was forced, he relapsed into long silences, and there was a sadder look in his eyes than Madeline had seen there since she promised to be his wife.

Her heart sank. What could be the cause of her

husband's melancholy? Was he thinking of the day when he had brought home another bride? Now that it came to the point, could he not bear to see her in the place once occupied by Nellie? She could think of no other reason for his sadness.

It was a lovely summer evening when they drove up to the Farm. The last rays of the setting sun just gilded its thatched roof, and shone among the foliage of the tall elms around it. At the garden gate, waiting for them, was little Fidge. He burst into a wild shout of delight when he saw them, and in another moment he was in his father's arms, and the shadow that had rested on Mortimer all day was dispelled for a time.

Scarcely, if at all, less rapturous was the child's greeting of his 'darling Mother Maidie' as he had settled to call Madeline. Laughing and talking, the three went into the parlour together, where their evening meal was laid out, in preference to the newly-fitted-up dining-room, and which was bright with flowers and plants.

'Only,' said Madeline, plaintively 'it looks so unnaturally tidy.'

'It won't do that long,' laughed Geoffrey. 'Fidge and I are warranted to make any place untidy in no time.' Then, taking her hand, he kissed her forehead, saying gravely and tenderly,—'Welcome home, my wife.'

'Thank you, dear,' she answered, standing on tiptoe to return the kiss. 'I am so glad to be at home.'

'Dad, Mr O.o. said you and Mother Maidie were a couple of spoons. What did he mean? He wouldn't explain,' broke in Fidge, unconsciously appropriate.

'Perhaps you will understand when you are older,'

replied Mortimer, with much presence of mind. 'Unless you can get Mother Maidie to explain to you now.'

But this she utterly declined to do.

They were merry enough while Fidge was with them, but presently, when he had gone to bed, and the husband and wife sat by the open window, through which floated the perfume of the flowers in the garden, Madeline noticed that once more a shadow seemed to have fallen over Geoffrey. She felt that if there were to be no secrets between them, and if their union was to be a true one,—it they were to be one in heart and soul, she must know its cause, cost her what it might.

'Husband,' she said softly, laying her hand on his, 'something has been making you sad all to-day. Will you tell me what it is?'

'You have quick eyes, my Maidie!' he answered, smiling at her.

'Of course I notice any change in you. What is it, dear? Is it that—' she paused. She could not put her fear into words.

'It is only this, Maidie. Perhaps you will think me a fool, when I have so much to make me happy, but I cannot help feeling it. Every other Mortimer has brought his bride home to Crane Court, while I can only bring you here. It is stupid of me,' he added, smiling sadly, 'but I shall never quite get over leaving Crane Court.'

A strange, soft happiness lighted up Madeline's face, in spite of the sorrow in her husband's voice. She answered gently,—

'Poor old Geoff. It must have been a fearful blow to you. But, dear, you will go back?'

He sighed heavily, as he replied,—

'Ah, Maidie, I hope so. But times are so bad, I sometimes fear—the dread haunts me that I shall have to sell the old place. It might be better than leaving it encumbered to Fidge. Wife, you have married a very poor man, you know.'

'I love your poverty better than other's wealth,' she answered softly. 'Listen, Geoffrey, for I have something to tell you. I never dared tell you before, and I made my people promise not to do so either, for you are so terribly proud I was afraid you might say you wouldn't marry me if you knew. You remember that old lady with whom we went to dine in Hyde Park Square—Aunt Louisa? She gave me that lovely diamond bracelet. Her husband was my godfather, and he tied up a great deal of her money so that it must come to me when she dies. So you see, Geoff, we shall he able to go back to Crane Court some day, and you can put Fidge in the army, and—you don't mind *now*, Geoff?'

For Mortimer was looking very serious. The fact was, he was trying to feel sorry his wife proved to be an heiress, but for the life of him he could not manage to do so. For a mighty weight was lifted off his mind, and at her words the one bitter drop in his cup of perfect happiness vanished. Some day he would go back to his home, and exile would be ended. The grim spectre of poverty need no longer frighten him.

The grave look disappeared from his face, and a very happy one succeeded it.

I am glad I did not know before!' he said. 'But now I do know, I could not mind if I tried. I cannot tell you what a huge relief it is to me, my Maidie.'

'Oh, Geoffrey, I never was glad about the money before, but I am now. How happy we will be!'

'How happy we are, my wife. I never thought there was such happiness left for me. I never was happier in all my life!'

'Nor I so happy. Oh, husband, how I love you! And now we shall be together all the rest of our lives!'

THE END.

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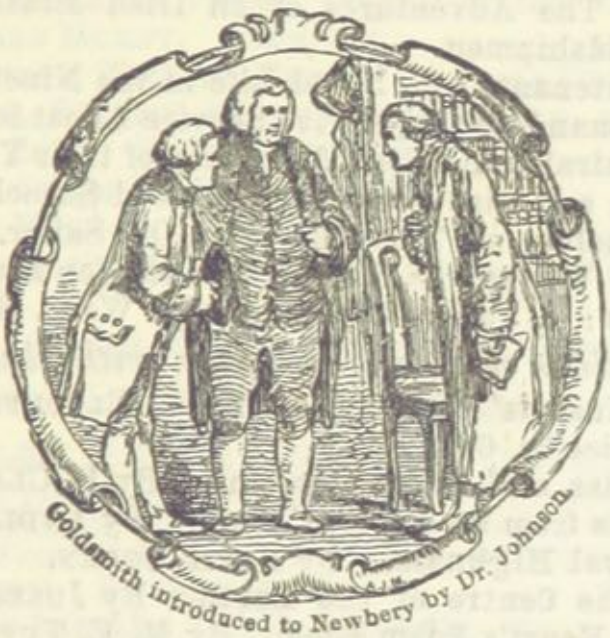

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