

'Who is he?' said Dollf. They had all of them, and even Dollf himself, forgotten what was the cause of this revelation. The young man came forward, very pale. 'I know nothing about this,' he said, looking round; 'nothing. I hope everybody will believe me. I want to know who he is.' No one said a word. They all stood round, struck silent, not knowing what to think. Mrs Harwood stood with her hand upon the table, supporting herself, yet asking no other support. She was perfectly pale, but her countenance had recovered its features and expression. She did not even look at her children, one on her knees, one standing up confronting her, demanding to know the truth. To neither of them did she give a word or look. Her eyes were fixed upon the man who was thus utterly in her hands. Vicars extracted an old, large pocket-book from the pocket of the patient, and handed it to her, not without a sort of smile—half-mocking—on his face. She took it, and, glancing at it with a certain disdain, as if a trick often employed but no longer necessary had disgusted her, flung it on the table.

'There are in this book,' she said, 'old scraps of paper of no value. This is what I am to pay his debts with. He has given it to me twenty times before. I got tired in the end of playing the old game over and over.'

'Mother, who is he?' cried Dollf. 'You have had him in your house in secret, never seeing the light of day, and I your son never knew. Who is he?'

Mrs Harwood made no reply. It was a question to which no one there could give any answer, except perhaps Gussy on her knees, with her hands covering her face, who did not look up or give any attention to what was going on. Meredith alone seemed to have some clear idea in his mind; his face shone with aroused interest and eagerness, like a man on the very trace of knowledge of the utmost importance to him. A rapid process of thought was going on in his mind, his intelligence was leaping from point to point. 'You will perhaps be surprised,' he said, 'to hear that I have known this for some time.'

'You?' Mrs Harwood half turned to him, a glance as of fire passing over her face. 'You?'

'Yes, I who have several interests involved. I had just received certain information on the subject when that young fool, thinking heaven knows what other folks, knocked me down, taking me at unawares, and nearly killed me. Oh, yes, it is perfectly true it was Dollf who did it. You start as if I was likely to make any fuss on that subject. Is it true that he had the money to pay everybody?—that is what I want to know.'

'Charley, Charley, do you mean to say that Dollf—'

'Oh, I mean nothing about Dollf,' he said, impatiently; 'answer me, Mrs Harwood.'

'I can't answer for nothing, Mrs Harwood,' cried Vicars, 'if you keep a lot of folks round him. He is working himself up into a fury again.'

The madman was twisting in his chair, fighting against the mechanical bonds that secured him. He was looking towards the pocketbook which lay on the table. 'She has got my money, and she throws it down for anybody to pick up,' he cried. 'My money! there's money there to pay everything! Why don't you pay those people and let 'em go—pay them, pay them and let them go—or else give me back my money,' he cried, wildly straining forward, with his white hair falling back, his reddened eyes blazing, struggling against his bonds. Mrs Harwood took up the pocketbook, and, weighing it, with a sort of forced laugh, in her hand—'You think there may be a fortune—enough to pay? And he thinks so. Give it to him, Vicars. We've tried to keep it all quiet, but it seems we have failed. You may have the door open now—you may do as you please. It can't matter any longer. I have thought of the credit of the family, and of many things that nobody else thinks of. And of his comfort—nobody can say I have not thought of his comfort. Look round you, everything, everything we could think of. But it is all of no use.'

The old man had caught the pocketbook from Vicars' hands with a pitiful demonstration of joy. He made a pretence of examining its contents, eagerly turning them over as if to make sure that nothing was lost, kissing the covers in enthusiasm and delight. He made an attempt with his confined arms to return it to his pocket, but, failing in that, kept it embraced in both his hands, from time to time kissing it with extravagant satisfaction. 'As long as I have got this they can do nothing to me,' he said.

While this pantomime was going on, and while still Mrs Harwood was speaking, a little movement and rustle in the group caught everybody's attention as if it had been a new fact, but it was only Janet stealing away behind the others who had a right there which she did not possess. She had been watching her moment. She herself, who had nothing to do with it, had received her share of discomfiture too. Her heart was sinking with humiliation and shame. Who had she to do with the mysteries of the Harwoods, the things they might have to conceal? What was she to them but a stranger of no account, never thought of, dragged into the midst of their troubles when it pleased them, thrown off again when they chose? Nobody would have said that Janet had any share in this crisis, and yet it was she who had received the sharpest arrow of all; or so, at least, she thought. She slipped behind Julia, who was bigger and more prominent than she, and stole through the bewildering stairs and passages. How well she seemed to know the way, as if it had been familiar to her for years. And it was she who had given information—she who had been the cause of everything, drawn here and drawn there into affairs alike alien to her, with which she had nothing to do. They were all moved by her departure; not morally, indeed, but by this mere stir it caused. Gussy rose from her knees, showing a countenance as pale as death and still glistening with tears. She said, 'Mamma, shall we go away? Whatever there may be to be said or explained, it ought not to be done here.' She went up to the old man in the chair, who was still embracing his pocket-book, and kissed him on the forehead. 'If any wrong has been done to you, I don't know of it,' she said; 'I thought it was nothing, but good.'

'No wrong has been done to him—none—none,' cried Mrs Harwood, suddenly dropping from her self-command and strength. 'Children, you may not believe me, since I've kept it secret from you. There has been no wrong to him—none—none. If there has been wrong it has not been to him. Oh, you may believe me at least, for I have never told you a lie. Everything has been done for him. Look round you—look round you and you will see.'

'Who is he?' said Dollf, obstinate and pale, standing behind the chair.

'You have no thought for me,' said the mother. 'You see me standing here, come here to defend you all, in desperation for you, and you never ask how I am to get

back, whether it will kill me—No, no, Janet has gone, who supported me, who was a stranger, and asked no questions, but only helped a poor woman here, and with trouble and distress. Ah,' she said, 'he would go mad and get free—he who was the cause of it all, but I have had to keep my sanity and my courage and bear it all, and look as if nothing was the matter, for fifteen years. For whom? Was it for me? It would have been better for me to have died and been done with it all. For your children, to give you a happy life, to do away with all disgrace, to give you every advantage. Yes, I'll take your arm, Ju; you have not been a good child, but you know no better. Get me to my chair before I drop down; get me to my chair—' She paused a moment, and looked round with a hard laugh. 'For I am very heavy,' she said, 'and I would have to be carried, and who would do it I don't know. Ju, make haste, before my strength is all gone. (Get me to my chair.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

Gussy was the last to leave of that strange procession, of whom no one spoke to the other. She closed the door after her, and the curtains, and followed the erection of Dollf, drawn up as it never had been in his life before, and walking stiffly, as if carrying a new weight and occupying a position unknown. They all came into the hall, defiling solemnly one after the other, to find Mrs Harwood deposited in her chair and awaiting them, almost as if the whole events of the evening had been a dream and she had never left that spot. It was with a strange embarrassment, however, that they looked at each other in the pale, clear light as they emerged from the doorway, almost like making new acquaintances, as if they had never seen each other before. Nobody certainly had seen Dollf in that new manifestation; nor was Gussy, she whose very existence had been wrapt up in that of Meredith, who had only lived to watch him for weeks past, recognisable. It was she who came out the last, but who made herself the first of the group. 'There may be a great many things to say,' said Gussy; 'but not to-night. We have all had a great many agitations to-night. My mother has been hunted for her life. My mother has done a thing which, so far as we know, she hasn't been able to do for years. Mr Meredith has had a bad illness, for which it appears this unfortunate family is responsible too. I only and my little sister—she passed here with an effort—no; I will not pretend; I have had my share of the shock, too. We'd better all separate for the night.'

'Gussy!' cried Mrs Harwood, with a sharp tone of appeal.

'Gussy!' cried Meredith, astonished, trying to take her hand to draw her towards him.

'Gussy!' said Dollf, with a certain indignation.

'It is no use,' she said, 'to appeal to me. I think I am the one who has been deceived all round. I thought I knew everything, and I've known nothing. Whatever may be the meaning of it, I for one am not able for any more to-night, and none of the rest ought to be able for it. I don't know whether I may have been deceived there, too, about how much invalids could bear. Good-night, mamma. I advise you to go to bed.'

Gussy waved her hand to the others without a word, and walked upstairs without turning her head. The sudden failure of a perfect faith in all the world, such as she had entertained without entering into complications, for which her mind was not adapted, is no small matter. It is alarming even for others to see. They all stood huddled together for a moment as if a rock or a tower had fallen before their eyes. They could scarcely see each other for the dust and darkness it made. All the other events of this startling night seemed to fall into the background. Gussy! who had been the central prop of the house, who had kept everybody together, done everything! When she thus threw up her arms they were all left in dismay and fell into an assemblage of atoms, of units—no longer a united party ready to meet all comers. Meredith, perhaps, he who had been the most eager, was the most discomfited of all. He had claimed Gussy's interest as his right for years. When she thus withdrew, not even asking if he were fatigued, speaking almost as if she thought that fatigue a pretence, he was so bewildered that he could do nothing. An anxious believer like this is accepted perhaps with too much faith and considered too inalienable a possession; and when she fails the shock is proportionately great. Without Gussy to stand by him, to make him believe himself a universal conqueror, always interesting, Meredith for the moment was like an idol thrown from his pedestal. He was more astonished than words could say. He said, hurriedly, 'I think Gussy is right, as she always is. Mrs Harwood, I will say good-night to her.' Mrs Harwood was altogether in a different mood. The period of reaction had not come with her as yet. She had got herself deposited in her chair in time enough to save her from any breaking down. And her spirit was full of excitement. 'I am ready,' she said, with a panting hot breath of mental commotion, 'to explain—whatever it is necessary to explain. Take me back to my room, Dollf. It is cold here.'

'Good-night,' said Meredith. 'I will not encroach upon your longer to-night.'

'As you like,' she said. 'I warn you, however, that tomorrow—Dollf, take me back to my fire.'

Dollf was unsubdued like his mother. The reaction from a long period of repression, and the sense of safety after a great alarm, no doubt acted upon his mind, though, so far as he was aware, he was moved by nothing save the overwhelming discovery he had made, and his indignant sense of wrong in finding such a secret retreat unsuspected in his mother's—in his own—house. 'We'll be better alone,' he said in the stern tone which was so new to him, putting his hand upon her chair; 'but perhaps you could walk if you tried,' he added, with rude sarcasm. 'He drove rather than wheeled her before him into the deserted room, where all was so brilliant and warm, the light blinking in the bright brass and steel, the lamps serenely burning, everything telling of the tranquil life, unbroken by any cheerful incidents, which had gone on there for so many years.'

'Now, mother,' said Dollf, 'we have got to have it out. Who is that man upstairs?'

Julia had followed them unremarked, and remained behind her mother's chair. Dollf stood before them, in the full freelight, very erect, inspired with indignation and that sense of superiority which injury gives. It had elevated him altogether in the scale of being. His own shortcomings had fallen from his consciousness. He was aware of nothing but that he, Dollf, in reality the head of the family, had been deceived and compromised.

Mrs Harwood took but little notice of her son. She took up her work which had been thrown upon the table and turned it over in her fingers. 'Gussy was right,' she said, 'and she was a little brisque in her way of saying it. I am certainly unable to bear anything more to-night.'

'I suppose, however, you can answer my question,' said Dollf.

'Go to bed, boy,' said his mother, 'and don't worry me. We have two or three things to talk over, you and I, which are too much for to-night.'

'I am not a boy any longer,' cried Dollf; 'you have made me a man. Who is it you have been hiding for years upstairs?'

She gave vent to a little fierce laugh. 'For my pleasure,' she said; 'for my amusement, as anybody may see.'

'Whether it is for your amusement or not,' said Dollf, 'I am of age, and I have a right to know who is living in my house.'

'In your house?' Her exasperation was growing. 'Don't force me, Dollf, to go into other questions to-night.'

'Whose house is it?' he said. 'There's been no question, because you have kept everything in your hands; but if I am to be driven to it, and claim my rights—'

'Your rights?' she cried, again repeating his words. 'Was it one of your rights to knock down a man like a coward from behind? It appears this is what you think you may be permitted to do with impunity—to have my house searched in every corner and to destroy all that I have been doing for years, and to bring shame and disgrace to a house that I have kept free of this, almost at the risk of my life.'

'I did not,' cried Dollf, interrupting her eagerly. 'I did not knock him down from behind. I had not time to think. I let fly at him as I passed. It's a lie to say I knocked him down from behind.'

'You did the same thing; you took him unawares. And you dare to question me! You killed a man at my door—or meant to do it—and never breathed a word to warn us, to keep us from the disgrace—'

Dollf was not clever enough to know what to say. His snort of rage was not attended by any force of bitter words. He only could repeat, with rage and incompetence, 'At your door!'

'Perhaps,' said Mrs Harwood, half carried away by passion, half influenced by the dismay which she knew she had in her mind to call forth, 'it would be better, since you are exact, to say at your father's door.'

Dollf responded with a strange cry. He did not understand it, but he felt all the same that a blow which stunned him had been directed at him, and that the ground was cut from beneath his feet.

'He has neither been tried, nor sentenced, nor anything proved against him,' cried Mrs Harwood, carried away now by the heat of her own excitement. 'All that has to be gone through before he can be put aside. And at this moment everything's his—the roof that covers you, the money you have been spending. It is no more your house—your house—than it is Julia's. It is your father's house.'

'My father is dead,' said Dollf, who had again grown very pale, the flush of passion dying out of his face.

'Yes,' said Mrs Harwood, 'and might have remained so, had it not been for your cowardly folly and Vicars' infatuation of you. How was it the man had not the sense to see that a fool like you would spoil all?'

'You are dreaming, you are mad,' said Dollf; 'you are telling me another lie.' But though he said this with almost diminished passion, the young fellow's superiority, his erect pose, his sense of being able to cow and overwhelm her, had come to an end. He fell into his usual attitude, his shoulders dropped and curved, his head hung down. He could fling a last insult at his mother, but no more. And his own mind began to be filled with unfathomable dismay.

Julia had been very uncertain what side to take. Her mind went naturally with her brother, who was most near herself. But a mother is a mother after all. You may feel her to be in some way your natural enemy when the matter is between yourself and her; but when another hand plucks at her it is different. A girl is not going to let her mother be insulted, who after all means her own side, without interposing. Julia suddenly flew forth from behind her mother's chair and flung herself upon Dollf's arm, seizing it and shaking him violently. 'How dare you speak to her like that?' cried Ju, 'you that can't do anything you try—not even kill Charley Meredith when you have the chance! I should be ashamed to look anyone in the face. Go away, go away, and leave us quiet, you that have done it all, that brought the police into the house, and yet did not hurt him to speak of, you great, useless, disappointing boy!'

Dollf did not know how to sustain this sudden assault. He looked round stupidly at the active assailant at his shoulder with a little pang, even in his agitated and helpless state, to find that Julia was no longer on his side. His head was going round and round, already in his soul he had entirely collapsed, although he still kept his feet in outward appearance. And it would have been difficult to end this scene without an entire breakdown on one side or the other, had not the pensive little voice of the parlourmaid become audible at this moment over their heads, making them all start and draw back into themselves. 'If you please, ma'am,' said Priscilla, 'for I can't find Miss Gussy, shall I take Mr Meredith's tray to his room, or shall I bring it in here?'

'I think Mr Meredith is going to bed,' said Mrs Harwood; 'he is a little tired. Take it into his room, Priscilla. And Miss Gussy has gone to bed; you may come now and help me to get into my room, and then shut up everything. It is later than I thought.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Priscilla, in those quiet tones of the commonplace which calm down every excitement. Priscilla indeed was herself basting with curiosity and eagerness to find out what had happened. The long-shut-up door stood ajar, and every maid in the house had already come to peep into the dark passage and wonder what it led to, and the keenest excitement filled the house. But a parlourmaid has as high a standard of duty as anyone, were it an archbishop. It was against the unwritten household law to show any such commotion. She took hold of the handle of her mistress's chair as she did on the mildest of domestic evenings, and drew her very steadily and gently away. The only revelation she made of knowing anything was in the suggestion that a little gruel with a glass of wine in it would be a proper thing for Mrs Harwood to take. 'You may bring me the glass of wine without the gruel,' Mrs Harwood was heard saying as the sound of her wheels