Then you will proceed to despoil yourself in favour of your niece and you will come to me to ask whether you haven't given as convincing proofs of unworldliness as any rules of ours could demand.'

'You are very cruel and very unjust!' returned Muriel, the colour mounting into her cheeks. 'You have no right to say that I shall act in that way, and one thing I can promise you—if ever I ask you again to let me join your Society, I will not come to you empty-handed.'

Mr Compton smiled. 'You will not find me cruel or unjust when you are empty-handed or in any real trouble,' said he; 'if I make cruel predictions now, it is only because I want to put you on your guard against verifying them. The danger is real, though you don't believe in it—we'll say no more upon the subject. The children will miss you terribly and you may be sure that we shall all welcome you if you care to come back to us on your return home.'

This was cold comfort; but it was all that poor Muriel could obtain from her hard-hearted clerical adviser, and she was fain to make the best of it.

CHAPTER XV.

ARTISTS who have reached a certain age—painters or musicians or whatever they may be—will remember that, in the days when they were still students and were ignorant of the existence of that great gulf which separates mere promise from proficiency, they had to pass through a period of profound discouragement and disappointment. Of students some are diffident from the outset, while others, whose intelligence moves more quickly, make light of preliminary obstacles and outstrip their competitors by sheer force of self-confidence. Teachers, as a rule, prefer the latter class, because there is better work to be got out of them at starting, yet it may be doubted whether their lot is an enviable one. For sooner or later the inevitable time must come when they find out that they are only just beginning to face difficulties instead of being within sight of their goal, and the re-action which sets in after this discovery is fatal to not a few amongst them. Somewhat analogous is the lot of those who have fondly and prematurely imagined that they understood their own characters and knew exactly what they were worth. All of a sudden something occurs which opens their eyes; they see themselves as others see them; they realise that they are not in the least what they had supposed, that they do not possess the qualities upon which they had plumed themselves; and then, if they are in any degree sensitive or conscientious, they are very apt to jump to the conclusion that they are worth nothing at all.

Such, at any rate, was the melancholy conclusion at which Muriel Wentworth arrived when she reached home and pondered over the conversation of which a part was recorded in the last chapter. It was not that she believed in the fulfilment of Compton's prophecy; he himself had as good as admitted that he was only warning her against a possible danger, though he had called it a real one. But what hurt her was the idea that she was a person about whom a prophecy of that kind could be made, and what caused her to despair was an inward conviction that the keen-witted little Superior of the Society of St. Francis had not wholly misjudged her. He had always refused to take her seriously, and it might very well be that he had been right. Perhaps she was not of the stuff of which his followers must needs be composed; when she examined herself she felt almost sure that she was not. She had too many misgivings; she was too much given to looking back after putting her hand to the plough; the world, in short, was a very complicated place of habitation, and it was no such simple matter to retire from it and all its complications. Of course she was determined that she would never under any circumstances be a consenting party to anything so monstrous as Sylvia's marriage with Sir Harry Brewster, yet something whispered to her that she was not altogether incapable of such criminal weakness, and so she lost faith in herself and in her strength of purpose. When all was said, what was she but a discontented woman who, for no better reason than that she was discontented, had fancied herself fitted to fill a more lofty position than the very commonplace and uninteresting one which had been assigned to her by Providence?

Self-knowledge is doubtless salutary; but self-distrust and self-disgust can do nobody any good; so that it was just as well for Muriel that she was interrupted in the midst of these gloomy meditations by the entrance of a visitor who had always recognised and rendered full justice to her virtues.

'I thought I might venture to look in upon you, since your niece is away from home,' Colonel Medhurst said. 'You told me the other day that you didn't wish me to meet her.'

'Did I? I only meant that you probably would not wish to meet her,' answered Muriel. 'She has come back; but she isn't in the room as you see, and I am glad of it, because I have something that I must tell you about her.'

'Indeed?' said the Colonel with a startled look. 'Surely not that she—but I know that cannot be so, I spoke to your brother—perhaps he told you about it?—and although I could not get him to say that he would turn his back upon Brewster, he seemed to be quite alive to the fact that the man is a scoundrel. It is inconceivable that he can have consented to give his daughter to such a brute. Besides, she has been out of London.'

'Yes; and so has Sir Harry Brewster. I had better tell you the truth at once, though of course we do not wish it to be talked about. Sir Harry deliberately followed Sylvia to Morecambe Priory, where she was staying, and he has proposed to her and she has accepted him. It is horrible and shameful; but that is what has happened, and I would rather that you heard of it from me than from somebody else—as I suppose you would have been almost sure to do, sooner or later. Naturally, James has forbidden the engagement, and will not allow her to see Sir Harry again; still I am afraid we must not flatter ourselves that the affair can be put an end to in that summary way. Sylvia submits after a fashion; but she declares that she will marry the man as soon as she is of age, and he has given her a release which is nothing more than nominal. My brother is persuaded that it will be all right; I wish I could think so!'

Colonel Medhurst bit his moustache and frowned. Mr Wentworth had apparently done his duty as a father; but that there should be any question of Sir Harry Brewster's according a release, nominal or otherwise, to the girl whom he had insulted by an offer of marriage was surely evidence that indulgence had been stretched a little too far.

'She can't possibly marry him, you know,' he said in a somewhat sharp tone of voice.

'I hope not,' answered Muriel despondently; 'but even if the marriage never takes place, her youth will have been spoilt all the same. What can we do? We are to go abroad immediately and we shall be away for some months I believe; but I don't know that the change will make much difference.'

Colonel Medhurst's face fell. 'You are going abroad?' he echoed disconsolately. 'And when you return, I shall have gone back to my regiment, I suppose. Will you like it?—the going abroad I mean.'

'I? Oh, no, I shall not like it at all; but it is not on my account that we are going. Perhaps it is the best thing we can do for Sylvia, though it seems a doubtful sort of remedy. At all events, by taking her away we shall prevent her seeing or hearing of Sir Harry Brewster.'

'I should have thought you might have prevented that without leaving home. And it does seem to me that your wishes are entitled to *some* slight consideration. Won't it be rather a wrench to you to have to give up your visits to the children's hospital and—and all that?'

'Yes; but I am not sure that I mind quite so much as I thought I should. Although I liked being with the children and helping to amuse them, that wasn't the kind of work that I could have gone on with for an indefinite time, and I never intended to stop short there. To tell the truth, I looked upon myself as a sort of probationer; but this afternoon Mr Compton has completely undeceived me. He never had any idea of admitting me into the Society; he does not think me fit for it.'

'Well, if you come to that,' observed Colonel Medhurst, smiling, 'nor do I. I think you are fitted for something better than such a life.'

'That is absurd. What can be better than to give all that you possess—your money and your labour and your whole heart—to your fellow-creatures? Mr Compton is convinced that I should never give my whole heart to them; and I can't feel certain that he is mistaken.'

'I sincerely trust that he is not,' declared Medhurst, who for the moment had forgotten all about Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster and who was decidedly of opinion that a portion of Miss Wentworth's heart ought to be reserved for less general purposes; 'it is easy to serve one's fellow-creatures without taking vows or wearing a poke-bonnet, and though the life of a Sister of Charity may be the best for some exceptional persons, I am sure it can't be the best for everybody.'

'Exactly so. I fancied myself an exceptional person, whereas I am nothing of the sort it appears. You and Mr Compton may have judged me quite correctly; but I can't pretend to feel exhilarated by your judgment, and that is one reason why I don't so very much object to leaving the country.'

'I understand,' gravely observed Colonel Medhurst—who, however, did not understand in the least. 'I am sorry that you should have been disappointed; but I confess I shan't be sorry if your disappointment causes you to give up the notions that you have had. I wish you weren't going away though!'

'Thank you; but I should imagine that there can hardly be another individual in London whose absence would be less noticed or less regretted. I am taking with me the only two human beings who want me; and it is doubtful whether even they are conscious of wanting me. There's no use in wondering; still I do wonder for what possible purpose I can have been sent into the world!'

Colonel Medhurst was deeply and honestly in love; but perhaps he had passed the age at which lovers are blind to any absurdities that can be uttered by the objects of their adoration. 'All that,' he exclaimed, laughing, 'because Compton is wise enough and kind enough to forbid you taking a leap in the dark.'

'No; not because of that, but because I feel that I am useless and that I always shall be useless. You, being a man, can't understand what I mean or what there is to make such a fuss about. A man has his profession; if he doesn't distinguish himself in it, at least it gives him work, and perhaps he doesn't particularly care about being distinguished. But women—or, at all events, women who are like me—must either be something out of the ordinary or else nothing at all. Is it a sign of inordinate vanity or ambition that I can't submit very cheerfully to the prospect of being nothing at all?'

'It is certainly no sign of vanity, and there isn't anything to be ashamed of in ambition. Only I should like to convince you, if I could, that the prospect before you is not in the least what you say it is.'

Muriel shook her head. 'I'm afraid you won't be able to do that,' said she.

'I'll have a try, anyhow, though I know that in about an hour's time I shall repent of having said what I am going to say. Now, Miss Wentworth, what is the matter with you is just this—isn't it?—that you think nobody cares for you. I wouldn't for the world accuse you of a yearning to be loved, which I suppose you would consider a very maudlin and school-girlish sort of sentiment; but when you come to think of it, it amounts to pretty much the same thing, and it's a wish which is common to all mortals whether they admit it or not. You say you want to be of use? but isn't your real meaning that you want to feel yourself essential to somebody or other's happiness?'

'To the best of my belief, I only mean what I say,' answered Muriel 'But Mr Compton has put me out of all conceit with myself, and if you demonstrate to me that I am a humbug you won't astonish me. Well; to whose happiness am I essential?'

'Oh, only to mine, so far as I know; but my reason for making that ridiculous confession—because of course it is rather ridiculous—is that it may suggest consolatory inferences to you. If, without making any effort to do so, and indeed without the faintest suspicion of what you have done, you can win the heart of an elderly well-seasoned colonel of cavalry and can reduce him to such a condition of idiocy that he worships the very ground you tread upon; doesn't it seem to follow that you can win other people's hearts, easily enough? Other people, you may be sure, will turn up. The right person may not be the first or the second or the third, but he will make his appearance some day, and when he does—well, I presume that you will feel very grateful to Compton, and very thankful that you are not a Sister of Charity.'

Never, perhaps, was a declaration of love worded in a manner more awkward to respond to. Muriel was genuinely surprised and taken aback; but her annoyance was greater than her surprise. Colonel Medhurst, she thought, had no business to place her in so embarrassing a position. An offer of marriage may be declined, with suitable expressions of sympathy and regret; but what is to be said to a man who avows himself a lover, yet abstains from putting himself forward as a suitor?

'I can't imagine that you are speaking seriously,' she said at length, in default of any better rejoinder.

'I am as serious as it is possible to be, although I don't wonder at your scepticism. Falling in love is what nobody can help; it may be a blessing or a misfortune, according to circumstances; but I don't deny that a man of my age who falls in love with a girl of yours deserves to be laughed at.'

'Age has nothing to do with it,' returned Muriel; 'look at Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster! Only—'

'Only if I were five and twenty, that wouldn't help me? Well, that may or may not be so; one can't tell. In any event, I am quite aware that I am not the right person of whom I was speaking just now, and I only mentioned my case by way of an example and illustration. However, since I have mentioned it, I shan't make matters worse by dwelling upon it for one minute more. There is a sort of satisfaction, which I am sure you won't grudge me, in telling you what I believe to be the truth, that nobody can ever love you more than I do. I won't say that nobody will ever love you as much, because that would be nonsense, I suppose; but I want you, if you will, to let me be your friend still and to remember that if at any time I can be of service to you, you will do me the greatest of kindnesses by telling me so. I shall be quartered at Colchester for the next two years in all probability. Now I'll say no more about myself. I wonder whether I have comforted you at all by letting you into my secret.'

By this time Muriel had recovered her self-possession and was able to frame something in the shape of a fitting reply. She did not say that Colonel Medhurst's avowal had comforted her, nor did she think it worth while to point out to him how wide he was of the mark in his estimate of her requirements; but she assured him that she was not ungrateful for the high compliment that he had paid her, and she expressed the hope which every woman who refuses an offer is bound to express, that he would soon meet with somebody more worthy of his affection than she could pretend to be.

He made her feel somewhat ashamed of her trite phrases by ignoring them and merely answering that his back was broad enough for his burden.

'As you said just now, a man has always his profession, and I have been tolerably lucky in mine, so that there is no great danger of my being superannuated. I shall reconcile myself to my fate somehow or other, and I hope and think that you will reconcile yourself to yours. Only, if I might ask a small favour of you, it would be that you will allow me credit for knowing my own mind.'

She might have retorted that that was more than he had been willing to allow her; but she did not, and she cried a little after he had gone away. It was not that she regretted the refusal which he had taken for granted; she did not love him, and for marriage in the abstract she had no inclination. Still it seemed a great pity that she could not be satisfied with what would satisfy the generality of women, and she was more sorry for herself than she was for the man who had proclaimed his ability to reconcile himself to his fate.

To grumble because one differs from the rest of one's species is, no doubt, a form of complaint to which the rest of the species find it difficult to listen with patience; yet we, who enjoy the blessings of being commonplace, should not be too hard upon those who do not share our advantages. After all, they are not to blame. Their peculiarities result from heredity or from the conformation of the skull or from some cause for which poor human nature cannot be held responsible, and we are still as far as ever from being able to answer that queer question, 'Did this man sin or his parents that he was born blind?'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE average young Englishman of the present period is, as all fair-minded observers will acknowledge, equal as regards manly attributes to his predecessors. He is probably not much more of a fool than they used to be; if he cannot be said to have made any great advance upon their intellectual level, he seems to have scored a point or two against them in a physical sense, and when called upon to fight he is seldom found wanting. There are, of course, exceptions; but the smooth-shaven pseudo-sportsman of to-day are not more representative of their class than were the Dundrearys of a former epoch, and a fair proportion even of these, it may be, formed of more solid stuff than might be inferred from their manners and appearance.

It was for instance, far more poor Johnny Hill's misfortune than his fault that the greater part of his time was spent in loafing aimlessly about the streets of London, that he was a frequenter of music-halls, a diligent reader of sporting papers and that he did what in him lay to earn the enviable reputation of being no end of a dog. In early life one must needs have ambitions of one kind or another, and that his had taken this somewhat ignoble form was chiefly due to circumstances beyond his control. His home was in London; he was very well off; he had passed through public school and university life without having the good luck to secure any friends whose friendship was worth possessing; he had a mother who worshipped him and of whose wisdom and knowledge he entertained, by one of those strange perversities for which there is no accounting, an exalted opinion; finally, he was rather stupid and unaffectedly humble. Something might have been made of him if he had been put into the army; but nothing was likely to be made of him now except an oaf—which indeed was the unflattering description that was too often given of him by his acquaintances.

It was the description that had always been given of him by Miss Sylvia Wentworth, to whom in all probability, he would never have dreamt of raising his eyes, had he not been urged thereto by maternal anxiety. Mrs Hill rather liked being told that her son belonged to a fast set, and her pride was gratified when she heard that he was upon terms of intimacy with certain harum-scarum young noblemen; but as she did not wish him to ruin himself, even in aristocratic company, she had made up her mind that the best thing to do was to provide him as speedily as might be with a charming wife, by whose aid he might hope to achieve social successes of a less perilous order. It was by her instigation he had begun to pay his addresses to Sylvia, and of