

"Mother," he said, hastily, "I will not be in this house when Florence comes. You must make some excuse for me. I will go abroad; or I will go down to Bristol—and live in the town—and only see Nancy from time to time. But I—I don't want to be here when Florence comes."

The truth flashed upon her in an instant; but, amidst all her alarm and bewilderment, she had the courage to say, in a low voice—

"You are right, Richard. If it is as I suspect—ah, well, there is no use thinking now of what might have been—you must none the less do what is right. It was thoughtless of me to ask Florence to come down again—but how could any one help loving her?—she is such a dear girl, so bright and clever and good-tempered—but you, Richard, your honour is at stake. Of course you have said nothing to her?"

"To Florence?—certainly not, mother. How could I? But there is not another word to be said. You must make some excuse for me to Florence; and I must go."

No, there was no use saying anything further; but the widow could not help adding, almost in an undertone, and wistfully:—

"If things could only have been different, Richard! I cannot help thinking that Florence—well, she has always seemed so much interested in you—and she would always talk so much about you, when she and I were alone together—and you yourself, see how you are never out of her letters—ah, well, it is no use thinking of what is impossible—but if you had been free, and if you had gone to your cousin, I don't think you need have feared her answer—"

He turned very pale.

"Don't say that—you have no right to say that, mother!"

"It is but a guess on my part," she said, sadly. "But I can imagine what her answer would have been. And then to think of her in this house—as my daughter and companion—so cheerful and self-reliant—so merry and good-humoured—"

"Mother," said he, almost reproachfully, "you seem to forget."

"No, I don't forget," she answered, with resignation, "I was thinking of what might have been; but I don't forget. And you are doing right, Richard. I will make excuse to Florence for you—whether you go abroad or down to Bristol. I suppose she will not suspect—no, she cannot suspect, if you have said nothing to her."

Nor was this the only act of renunciation on Mr. Richard's part. Just at this time he had to go up to London for a few days to transact some business with his mother's lawyers; but he did not apprise his uncle and cousin of his coming to town, nor did he once call at the house in Melbury road. It is true that during these few days he found his way a number of times to that neighbourhood, and on more than one occasion he caught a glimpse of Cousin Floss, as she drove up in the barouche, or came out walking with her maid. He knew he had no right to do this thing, but he regarded it as a sort of bidding good-bye to a broken fancy, an impossible dream. To whom could it do any harm? Cousin Floss could know nothing of it—he studiously kept himself concealed. If this unspoken farewell was unduly prolonged (for he remained in London some days longer than was necessary for the lawyers) it was himself who was lacerated by its pain. It did not matter to Nancy; marriage would condone everything; she had no part or concern in these phantasies of the hour, that would soon be forgotten among the actualities of life.

By the time Cousin Floss's visit drew near, Mr. Richard had made all his preparations. He was going down to Bristol. He argued with himself that, being constantly in the same neighbourhood with Nanciebel would keep alive in his recollection what was due to her; and, moreover, he considered that in the circumstances he might fairly ask for some modification of the arrangements that had been arrived at in family conclave with regard to his visits. Might he not see Nanciebel once a week—for a single hour? Both he and she had hitherto loyally obeyed the conditions that had been imposed; might not these be relaxed a little more? It was not as a punishment, but as a test, that this separation had been agreed upon; and here were the two of them, after a lapse of a considerable time, of the same mind. Mr. Richard endeavoured to extract courage and hope for the future from these wise and virtuous reflections; but it was with rather a heavy heart that he drove away to the station, on the day previous to Cousin Floss's arrival.

Cousin Floss, when she stepped out of the pony-chaise on the following afternoon, and found the widow waiting her in the porch, was in the highest spirits, and her always bright enough eyes fairly shone with gladness.

"Do you know, Aunt Cecilia," she said, as she hugged and kissed the little woman, "it is just like getting home again to see your dear face once more. When I saw Thomas and the pony and the carriage at the station, I said to myself, 'Ah, now you will soon be among old friends!'"

"Come away in, dear," said the widow, quite as affectionately, and she took the girl by the arm and led her into the house. "I declare it does my heart good to hear your voice again."

"And papa is so sorry he couldn't come with me this time," continued this blithe young damsel—who looked all round the drawing-room as if expecting to see some one—"but the fact is, he has found himself a good deal better of late, and he thinks it is because the Kensington neighbourhood suits him, and he likes the house.—The garden is just about forty yards long; so twenty-two times up and down makes an easily-measured half-mile; and he can get his regulation quantity done every day without being overlooked by anybody. I think he will keep on that house. He hasn't been looking about for any other. But—but—Aunt Cecilia," continued Miss Florence—again glancing back into the hall, "where is Cousin Dick?"

Only for the moment did the widow seem a little embarrassed.

"He has had to go away, dear," she said, striving to appear quite placid and unconcerned. "He was so very sorry—I was to tell you how sorry he was. Nothing but the most absolute necessity compelled him—you may be sure of that."

"He has gone away?" said Cousin Floss, in return, with a kind of puzzled, uncertain look. "Where has he gone, Aunt Cecilia?"

"To Bristol, dear," answered the widow.

"Oh, to Bristol?" repeated the young lady slowly. "That is where his uncle lives—his uncle Charles—isn't it?"

And when Mr. Richard's mother signified assent, the young lady said no more. She seemed a trifle thoughtful as she went away to her own room to look to her things; but when she appeared at dinner she was as cheerful as ever; and the widow with affectionate eyes and many a kindly speech, showed how she rejoiced to have this pleasant companion once more with her.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CHECKMATE.

When Mr. Richard arrived in Bristol he put up at an hotel overlooking College Green; but he had no intention of going at once to Holiwell vicarage; he wanted time to think. For indeed he was as one distracted; wild projects flashed through his brain—in a sort of restless and reckless despair; one moment he would be for confessing the whole truth to Nanciebel, and throwing himself on her mercy; the next he would be for an immediate marriage, as the one definite settlement of all these perplexities. He went out and wandered through the streets of the town, seeing hardly anything. He followed the Whiteladies' Road until he emerged on Durham Down; but the fair English landscape, all shining in the white light of the Spring, brought no joy to his heart. When he ought to have been thinking of Nanciebel, and of his visit of to-morrow, he was in reality wondering what his cousin Florence had said when she discovered he was gone; he was picturing her walking in the garden with the little widow; he could see her driving in to Stratford, to make her afternoon purchases there. And what was that his mother had hinted?—that if in other circumstances he had made bold to speak to Florence Kingston, he need not have feared her answer. That was not even to be thought of. How could the widow know, in any case! It was but the fond partiality of a mother. He had to turn from these fruitless and agonising speculations over what might have been to the obvious duty that lay before him; and again and again he strove to convince himself that, if he and Nanciebel were once married, there would be an end to all these hopeless and futile regrets. He had been bewildered by a brilliant and fascinating apparition, Nancy and her quiet ways would win in the end. The common-place security of ordinary life was sufficient for most folk. Vain dreams, farewell!—here were peace and content, and the even tenor of one's way.

Next morning he had summoned up courage, and even formed some inchoate plans; about eleven he started off and drove out to Holiwell vicarage. Arrived there, the housekeeper informed him that his uncle had just gone off to see some old woman in the neighborhood; that the young ladies were at their drawing lessons; and that Miss Marlow was in the garden. Accordingly, Mr. Richard replied that he would himself go and seek Miss Marlow; and presently he had stepped forth into the outer air.

He encountered Nanciebel rather suddenly—she was coming through the archway in the walk of yew—and the instant she caught sight of him she stopped, looking startled and frightened.

"What is it, Richard?" she said, when he went up to her.

And he was amazed also. She seemed to shrink back from him, as if dreading what he had to say. Yet was not this in some measure a relief? If she had flown to him with love and joy in her eyes, how could he have played the hypocrite!

"Well, I have come to see you," he said.

"Yes," she made answer, rather breathlessly—and she kept staring at him with anxious scrutiny—"yes—but—but is that all?"

"I don't understand you," he made answer, still wondering, "I—I have no bad news, if that is what you fear—nor any news, indeed."

"Oh," she said, with her face lightening considerably, "it is merely a visit? There is nothing—nothing of importance? You see," she continued as if eager to explain, "I did not expect you, Richard—you sent no letter—and you have come long before the usual time. I was almost afraid you might have heard—I mean that there might be some bad news, or some occasion for your coming so unexpectedly. And how is your mother? It was so kind of her to send me Tennyson's last volume—to keep my set complete. Aren't the flowers here pretty?—the springtime is always so delicious. And when are you going back to Stratford, Richard?"

He could not make Nanciebel out at all. Apparently she was most desirous to be friendly and complaisant; yet his presence seemed to embarrass her. She was nervous—constrained—her eyes watchful and furtive; this was not the Nanciebel who had clung closely to him as they walked up and down the little courtyard, under the stars. Nevertheless, he was here to perform a duty.

"Yes, I have come before the proper time, Nancy," said he, ignoring her last question, "and it is to put a proposal before you, and before my uncle. This separation that was agreed upon—well, you have complained of it before, and of your loneliness here, and I don't wonder at it—this separation has lasted long enough, it seems to me. I think if we could get everybody to agree we might as well be married at once—"

And again she regarded him with a sort of apprehensive look, which she instantly concealed.

"Oh, do you think so, Richard," she said, in an off-hand way.

"For I am hardly of your opinion. I think that an arrangement that was agreed to by everybody should be carried out, and then, you see, no one will be able to complain. It was to be a trial; and who could tell what was to happen when it began; and who can tell what may happen before it ends? For, you see, people are so different, Richard," continued this profound philosopher, and she seemed anxious to talk away this project into nothingness. "There are some who don't care about being petted, who are independent, and self-sufficing—and they are mostly men; and there are others who like to be petted and made much of—and they are mostly women. Very well, when there is such a difference between dispositions, isn't it wise that they should be tested by time?"

"You didn't talk that way once," said he, with a touch rather of surprise than of actual disappointment or chagrin.