

which the gracious sun struck out for them in its setting. And O there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And O what a bright old song it is, that O 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!

CHAPTER V.

CONCERNING THE MENDICANT'S BRIDE.

THE impressive gloom with which Mrs. Wilfer received her husband on his return from the wedding, knocked so hard at the door of the cherubic conscience, and likewise so impaired the firmness of the cherubic legs, that the culprit's tottering condition of mind and body might have roused suspicion in less occupied persons than the grimly heroic lady, Miss Lavinia, and that esteemed friend of the family, Mr. George Sampson. But, the attention of all three being fully possessed by the main fact of the marriage, they had happily none to bestow on the guilty conspirator; to which fortunate circumstance he owed the escape for which he was in nowise indebted to himself.

"You do not, R. W.," said Mrs. Wilfer from her stately corner, "inquire for your daughter Bella."

"To be sure, my dear," he returned, with a most flagrant assumption of unconsciousness, "I did omit it. How—or perhaps I should rather say where—is Bella?"

"Not here," Mrs. Wilfer proclaimed, with folded arms.

The cherub faintly muttered something to the abortive effect of "Oh, indeed, my dear!"

"Not here," repeated Mrs. Wilfer, in a stern sonorous voice. "In a word, R. W., you have no daughter Bella."

"No daughter Bella, my dear?"

"No. Your daughter Bella," said Mrs. Wilfer, with a lofty air of never having had the least copartnership in that young lady: of whom she now made reproachful mention as an article of luxury which her husband had set up entirely on his own account, and in direct opposition to her advice:—"—your daughter Bella has bestowed herself upon a Mendicant."

"Good gracious, my dear!"

"Show your father his daughter Bella's letter, Lavinia," said Mrs. Wilfer, in her monotonous Act of Parliament tone, and waving her hand. "I think your father will admit it to be documentary proof of what I tell him. I believe your father is acquainted with his daughter Bella's writing. But I do not know. He may tell you he is not. Nothing will surprise me."

"Posted at Greenwich, and dated this morning," said the Irrepressible, flouncing at her father in handing him the evidence. "Hopes Ma won't be angry, but is happily married to Mr. John Rokesmith, and didn't mention it beforehand to avoid words, and please tell darling you, and love to me, and I should like to know what you'd have said if any other unmarried member of the family had done it!"

He read the letter, and faintly exclaimed "Dear me!"

"You may well say Dear me!" rejoined Mrs. Wilfer, in a deep tone. Upon which encouragement he said it again, though scarcely with the success he had expected; for the scornful lady then remarked, with extreme bitterness: "You said that before."

"It's very surprising. But I suppose, my dear," hinted the cherub, as he folded

the letter after a disconcerting silence, "that we must make the best of it! Would you object to my pointing out, my dear, that Mr. John Rokesmith is not (so far as I am acquainted with him), strictly speaking, a Mendicant?"

"Indeed?" returned Mrs. Wilfer, with an awful air of politeness. "Truly so? I was not not aware that Mr. John Rokesmith was a gentleman of landed property. But I am much relieved to hear it."

"I doubt if you *have* heard it, my dear," the cherub submitted with hesitation.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Wilfer, "I make false statements, it appears? So be it. If my daughter flies in my face, surely my husband may. The one thing is not more unnatural than the other. There seems a fitness in the arrangement. By all means!" Assuming, with a shiver of resignation, a deadly cheerfulness.

But, here the Irrepressible skirmished into the conflict, dragging the reluctant form of Mr. Sampson after her.

"Ma," interposed the young lady, "I must say I think it would be much better if you would keep to the point, and not hold forth about people's flying into people's faces, which is nothing more nor less than impossible nonsense."

"How!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilfer, knitting her dark brows.

"Just im-possible nonsense, Ma," returned Lavvy, "and George Sampson knows it is, as well as I do."

Mrs. Wilfer suddenly becoming petrified, fixed her indignant eyes upon the wretched George: who, divided between the support due from him to his love, and the support due from him to his love's mamma, supported nobody, not even himself.

"The true point is," pursued Lavinia, "that Bella has behaved in a most unsterily way to me, and might have severely compromised me with George and with George's family, by making off and getting married in this very low and disreputable manner—with some pew-opener or other, I suppose, for a bridesmaid—when she ought to have confided in me, and ought to have said, 'If Lavvy, you consider it due to your engagement with George, that you should countenance the occasion by being present, then, Lavvy, I beg you to *be* present, keeping my secret from Ma and Pa.' As of course I should have done."

"As of course you would have done? Ingrate!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilfer. "Viper!"

"I say! You know, ma'am. Upon my honour you mustn't," Mr. Sampson remonstrated, shaking his head seriously. "With the highest respect for you, ma'am, upon my life you mustn't. No really, you know. When a man with the feelings of a gentleman finds himself engaged to a young lady, and it comes (even on the part of a member of the family) to vipers, you know!—I would merely put it to your own good feeling, you know," said Mr. Sampson, in rather lame conclusion.

Mrs. Wilfer's baleful stare at the young gentleman in acknowledgment of his obliging interference was of such a nature that Miss Lavinia burst into tears, and caught him round the neck for his protection.

"My own unnatural mother," screamed the young lady, "wants to annihilate George! But you shan't be annihilated, George. I'll die first!"

Mr. Sampson, in the arms of his mistress, still struggled to shake his head at Mrs. Wilfer, and to remark: "With every sentiment of respect for you, you know, ma'am—vipers really doesn't do you credit."

"You shall not be annihilated, George!" cried Miss Lavinia. "Ma shall destroy me first, and then she'll be contented. Oh, oh, oh! Have I lured George from his happy home to expose him to this! George, dear, be free! Leave me, ever dearest George, to Ma and to my fate. Give my love to your aunt, George dear, and implore her not to curse the viper that has crossed your path and

blighted your existence. Oh, oh, oh!" The young lady, who, hysterically speaking, was only just come of age, and had never gone off yet, here fell into a highly creditable crisis, which, regarded as a first performance, was very successful; Mr. Sampson, bending over the body meanwhile, in a state of distraction, which induced him to address Mrs. Wilfer in the inconsistent expressions: "Demon—with the highest respect for you—behold your work!"

The cherub stood helplessly rubbing his chin and looking on, but on the whole was inclined to welcome this diversion as one in which, by reason of the absorbent properties of hysterics, the previous question would become absorbed. And so, indeed, it proved, for the Irrepressible gradually coming to herself, and asking with wild emotion, "George, dear, are you safe?" and further, "George, love, what has happened? Where is Ma?" Mr. Sampson, with words of comfort, raised her prostrate form, and handed her to Mrs. Wilfer as if the young lady were something in the nature of refreshments. Mrs. Wilfer with dignity partaking of the refreshments, by kissing her once on the brow (as if accepting an oyster), Miss Lavvy, tottering, returned to the protection of Mr. Sampson: to whom she said, "George, dear, I am afraid I have been foolish; but I am still a little weak and giddy; don't let go my hand, George!" And whom she afterwards greatly agitated at intervals, by giving utterance, when least expected, to a sound between a sob and a bottle of soda-water, that seemed to rend the bosom of her frock.

Among the most remarkable effects of this crisis may be mentioned its having, when peace was restored, an inexplicable moral influence, of an elevating kind, on Miss Lavinia, Mrs. Wilfer, and Mr. George Sampson, from which R. W. was altogether excluded, as an outsider and non-sympathiser. Miss Lavinia assumed a modest air of having distinguished herself; Mrs. Wilfer, a serene air of forgiveness and resignation; Mr. Sampson, an air of having been improved and chastened. The influence pervaded the spirit in which they returned to the previous question.

"George, dear," said Lavvy, with a melancholy smile, "after what has passed, I am sure Ma will tell Pa that he may tell Bella we shall all be glad to see her and her husband."

Mr. Sampson said he was sure of it too; murmuring how eminently he respected Mrs. Wilfer, and ever must, and ever would. Never more eminently, he added, than after what had passed.

"Far be it from me," said Mrs. Wilfer, making deep proclamation from her corner, "to run counter to the feelings of a child of mine, and of a Youth," Mr. Sampson hardly seemed to like that word, "who is the object of her maiden preference. I may feel—nay, know—that I have been deluded and deceived. I may feel—nay, know—that I have been set aside and passed over. I may feel—nay, know—that after having so far overcome my repugnance towards Mr. and Mrs. Boffin as to receive them under this roof, and to consent to your daughter Bella's," here turning to her husband, "residing under theirs, it were well if your daughter Bella," again turning to her husband, "had profited in a worldly point of view by a connection so distasteful, so disreputable. I may feel—nay, know—that in uniting herself to Mr. Rokesmith she has united herself to one who is, in spite of shallow sophistry, a Mendicant. And I may feel well assured that your daughter Bella," again turning to her husband, "does not exalt her family by becoming a Mendicant's bride. But I suppress what I feel, and say nothing of it."

Mr. Sampson murmured that this was the sort of thing you might expect from one who had ever in her own family been an example and never an outrage. And ever more so (Mr. Sampson added, with some degree of obscurity), and never more so, than in and through what had passed. He must take the liberty of adding, that what was true of the mother, was true of the youngest daughter, and

that he could never forget the touching feelings that the conduct of both had awakened within him. In conclusion, he did hope that there wasn't a man with a beating heart who was capable of something that remained undescribed, in consequence of Miss Lavinia's stopping him as he reeled in his speech.

"Therefore, R. W.," said Mrs. Wilfer, resuming her discourse and turning to her lord again, "let your daughter Bella come when she will, and she will be received. So," after a short pause, and an air of having taken medicine in it, "so will her husband."

"And I beg, Pa," said Lavinia, "that you will not tell Bella what I have undergone. It can do no good, and it might cause her to reproach herself."

"My dearest girl," urged Mr. Sampson, "she ought to know it."

"No, George," said Lavinia, in a tone of resolute self-denial. "No, dearest George, let it be buried in oblivion."

Mr. Sampson considered that "too noble."

"Nothing is too noble, dearest George," returned Lavinia. "And, Pa, I hope you will be careful not to refer before Bella, if you can help it, to my engagement to George. It might seem like reminding her of her having cast herself away. And I hope, Pa, that you will think it equally right to avoid mentioning George's rising prospects when Bella is present. It might seem like taunting her with her own poor fortunes. Let me ever remember that I am her younger sister, and ever spare her painful contrasts, which could not but wound her sharply."

Mr. Sampson expressed his belief that such was the deméanour of Angels. Miss Lavvy replied with solemnity, "No, dearest George, I am but too well aware that I am merely human."

Mrs. Wilfer, for her part, still further improved the occasion by sitting with her eyes fastened on her husband, like two great black notes of interrogation, severely inquiring, "Are you looking into your breast? Do you deserve your blessings? Can you lay your hand upon your heart and say that you are worthy of so hysterical a daughter? I do not ask you if you are worthy of such a wife—put me out of the question—but are you sufficiently conscious of, and thankful for, the pervading moral grandeur of the family spectacle on which you are gazing? These inquiries proved very harassing to R. W., who, besides being a little disturbed by wine, was in perpetual terror of committing himself by the utterance of stray words that would betray his guilty foreknowledge. However, the scene being over, and—all things considered—well over, he sought refuge in a doze; which gave his lady immense offence.

"Can you think of your daughter Bella, and sleep?" she disdainfully inquired. To which he mildly answered, "Yes, I think I can, my dear."

"Then," said Mrs. Wilfer, with solemn indignation, "I would recommend you, if you have a human feeling, to retire to bed."

"Thank you, my dear," he replied; "I think it is the best place for me." And with these unsympathetic words very gladly withdrew.

Within a few weeks afterwards, the Mendicant's bride (arm-in-arm with the Mendicant) came to tea, in fulfilment of an engagement made through the father. And the way in which the Mendicant's bride dashed at the unassailable position so considerably to be held by Miss Lavvy, and scattered the whole of the works in all directions in a moment, was triumphant.

"Dearest Ma," cried Bella, running into the room with a radiant face, "how do you do, dearest Ma?" And then embraced her joyously. "And Lavvy darling, how do you do, and how's George Sampson, and how is he getting on, and when are you going to be married, and how rich are you going to grow? You must tell me all about it, Lavvy dear, immediately. John, love, kiss Ma and Lavvy, and then we shall all be at home and comfortable."

Mrs. Wilfer stared, but was helpless. Miss Lavinia stared, but was helpless. Apparently with no compunction, and assuredly with no ceremony, Bella tossed her bonnet away, and sat down to make the tea.

"Dearest Ma and Lavvy, you both take sugar, I know. And, Pa (you good little Pa), you don't take milk. John does. I didn't before I was married; but I do now, because John does. John, dear, did you kiss Ma and Lavvy? Oh, you did! Quite correct, John dear; but I didn't see you do it, so I asked. Cut some bread and butter, John, that's a love. Ma likes it doubled. And now you must tell me, dearest Ma and Lavvy, upon your words and honours! didn't you for a moment—just a moment—think I was a dreadful little wretch when I wrote to say I had run away?"

Before Mrs. Wilfer could wave her gloves, the Mendicant's bride in her merriest affectionate manner went on again.

"I think it must have made you rather cross, dear Ma and Lavvy, and I know I deserved that you should be very cross. But you see I had been such a heedless, heartless creature, and had led you so to expect that I should marry for money, and so to make sure that I was incapable of marrying for love, that I thought you couldn't believe me. Because, you see, you didn't know how much of Good, Good, Good, I had learnt from John. Well! So I was sly about it, and ashamed of what you supposed me to be, and fearful that we couldn't understand one another and might come to words, which we should all be sorry for afterwards, and so I said to John that if he liked to take me without any fuss, he might. And as he did like, I let him. And we were married at Greenwich church in the presence of nobody—except an unknown individual who dropped in," here her eyes sparkled more brightly, "and half a pensioner. And now, isn't it nice, dearest Ma and Lavvy, to know that no words have been said which any of us can be sorry for, and that we are all the best of friends at the pleasantest of teas!"

Having got up and kissed them again, she slipped back to her chair (after a loop on the road to squeeze her husband round the neck) and again went on.

"And now you will naturally want to know, dearest Ma and Lavvy, how we live, and what we have got to live upon. Well! And so we live on Blackheath, in the charm—ingest of dolls' houses, de—lightly furnished, and we have a clever little servant, who is de—cidedly pretty, and we are economical and orderly, and do everything by clockwork, and we have a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and we have all we want, and more. And lastly, if you would like to know in confidence, as perhaps you may, what is my opinion of my husband, my opinion is—that I almost love him!"

"And if you would like to know in confidence, as perhaps you may," said her husband, smiling, as he stood by her side, without her having detected his approach, "my opinion of my wife, my opinion is——" But Bella started up, and put her hand upon his lips.

"Stop, sir! No, John dear! Seriously! Please not yet awhile! I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house."

"My darling, are you not?"

"Not half, not a quarter, so much worthier as I hope you may some day find me! Try me through some reverse, John—try me through some trial—and tell them after that, what you think of me."

"I will, my Life," said John. "I promise it."

"That's my dear John. And you won't speak a word now; will you?"

"And I won't," said John, with a very expressive look of admiration around him, "speak a word now!"

She laid her laughing cheek upon his breast to thank him, and said, looking at the rest of them sideways out of her bright eyes: "I'll go further, Pa

and Ma and Lavvy. John don't suspect it—he had no idea of it—but I quite love him!”

Even Mrs. Wilfer relaxed under the influence of her married daughter, and seemed in a majestic manner to imply remotely that if R. W. had been a more deserving object, she too might have condescended to come down from her pedestal for his beguilement. Miss Lavinia, on the other hand, had strong doubts of the policy of the course of treatment, and whether it might not spoil Mr. Sampson, if experimented on in the case of that young gentleman. R. W. himself was for his part convinced that he was father of one of the most charming of girls, and that Rokesmith was the most favoured of men; which opinion, if propounded to him, Rokesmith would probably not have contested.

The newly-married pair left early, so that they might walk at leisure to their starting-place from London, for Greenwich. At first they were very cheerful and talked much; but after a while, Bella fancied that her husband was turning somewhat thoughtful. So she asked him:

“John dear, what's the matter?”

“Matter, my love?”

“Won't you tell me,” said Bella, looking up into his face, “what you are thinking of?”

“There's not much in the thought, my soul. I was thinking whether you wouldn't like me to be rich?”

“You rich, John?” repeated Bella, shrinking a little.

“I mean, really rich. Say, as rich as Mr. Boffin. You would like that?”

“I should be almost afraid to try, John dear. Was he much the better for his wealth? Was I much the better for the little part I once had in it?”

“But all people are not the worse for riches, my own.”

“Most people?” Bella musingly suggested with raised eyebrows.

“Nor even most people, it may be hoped. If you were rich, for instance, you would have a great power of doing good to others.”

“Yes, sir, for instance,” Bella playfully rejoined; “but should I exercise the power, for instance? And again, sir, for instance; should I, at the same time, have a great power of doing harm to myself?”

Laughing and pressing her arm, he retorted: “But still, again for instance; would you exercise that power?”

“I don't know,” said Bella, thoughtfully shaking her head. “I hope not. I think not. But it's so easy to hope not, and think not, without the riches.”

“Why don't you say, my darling—instead of that phrase—being poor?” he asked, looking earnestly at her.

“Why don't I say, being poor? Because I am not poor. Dear John, it's not possible that you suppose I think we are poor?”

“I do, my love.”

“Oh John!”

“Understand me, sweetheart. I know that I am rich beyond all wealth in having you; but I think of you, and think for you. In such a dress as you are wearing now, you first charmed me, and in no dress could you ever look, to my thinking, more graceful or more beautiful. But you have admired many finer dresses this very day; and is it not natural that I wish I could give them to you?”

“It's very nice that you should wish it, John. It brings these tears of grateful pleasure into my eyes, to hear you say so with such tenderness. But I don't want them.”

“Again,” he pursued, “we are now walking through the muddy streets. I love those pretty feet so dearly that I feel as if I could not bear the dirt to

soil the sole of your shoe. Is it not natural that I wish you could ride in a carriage?”

“It's very nice,” said Bella, glancing downward at the feet in question, “to know that you admire them so much, John dear, and since you do, I am sorry that these shoes are a full size too large. But I don't want a carriage, believe me.”

“You would like one, if you could have one, Bella?”

“I shouldn't like it for its own sake, half so well as such a wish for it. Dear John, your wishes are as real to me as the wishes in the Fairy story, that were all fulfilled as soon as spoken. Wish me everything that you can wish for the woman you dearly love, and I have as good as got it, John. I have better than got it, John!”

They were not the less happy for such talk, and home was not the less home for coming after it. Bella was fast developing a perfect genius for home. All the loves and graces seemed (her husband thought) to have taken domestic service with her, and to help her to make home engaging.

Her married life glided happily on. She was all alone all day, for, after an early breakfast her husband repaired every morning to the City, and did not return until their late dinner hour. He was “in a China house,” he explained to Bella: which she found quite satisfactory, without pursuing the China house into minuter details than a wholesale vision of tea, rice, odd-smelling silks, carved boxes, and tight-eyed people in more than double-soled shoes, with their pigtailed pulling their heads of hair off, painted on transparent porcelain. She always walked with her husband to the railroad, and was always there again to meet him; her old coquetish ways a little sobered down (but not much), and her dress as daintily managed as if she managed nothing else. But, John gone to business and Bella returned home, the dress would be laid aside, trim little wrappers and aprons would be substituted, and Bella, putting back her hair with both hands, as if she were making the most business-like arrangements for going dramatically distracted, would enter on the household affairs of the day. Such weighing and mixing and chopping and grating, such dusting and washing and polishing, such snipping and weeding and trowelling and other small gardening, such making and mending and folding and airing, such diverse arrangements, and above all such severe study! For Mrs. J. R., who had never been wont to do too much at home as Miss B. W., was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support to a sage volume entitled *The Complete British Family Housewife*, which she would sit consulting, with her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, like some perplexed enchantress poring over the Black Art. This, principally because the *Complete British Housewife*, however sound a Briton at heart, was by no means an expert Briton at expressing herself with clearness in the British tongue, and sometimes might have issued her directions to equal purpose in the Kamskatchan language. In any crisis of this nature, Bella would suddenly exclaim aloud, “Oh, you ridiculous old thing, what do you mean by that? You must have been drinking!” And having made this marginal note, would try the *Housewife* again, with all her dimples screwed into an expression of profound research.

There was likewise a coolness on the part of the *British Housewife*, which Mrs. John Rokesmith found highly exasperating. She would say, “Take a salamander,” as if a general should command a private to catch a Tartar. Or, she would casually issue the order, “Throw in a handful—” of something entirely unattainable. In these, the *Housewife's* most glaring moments of unreason, Bella would shut her up and knock her on the table, apostrophising her with the compliment, “Oh you ARE a stupid old donkey! Where am I to get it, do you think?”

Another branch of study claimed the attention of Mrs. John Rokesmith for a regular period every day. This was the mastering of the newspaper, so that she might be close up with John on general topics when John came home. In her desire to be in all things his companion, she would have set herself with equal zeal to master Algebra, or Euclid, if he had divided his soul between her and either. Wonderful was the way in which she would store up the City Intelligence, and beamingly shed it upon John in the course of the evening, incidentally mentioning the commodities that were looking up in the markets, and how much gold had been taken to the Bank, and trying to look wise and serious over it until she would laugh at herself most charmingly, and would say, kissing him: "It all comes of my love, John dear."

For a City man, John certainly did appear to care as little as might be for the looking up or looking down of things, as well as for the gold that got taken to the Bank. But he cared, beyond all expression, for his wife, as a most precious and sweet commodity that was always looking up, and that never was worth less than all the gold in the world. And she, being inspired by her affection, and having a quick wit and a fine ready instinct, made amazing progress in her domestic efficiency, though, as an endearing creature, she made no progress at all. This was her husband's verdict, and he justified it by telling her that she had begun her married life as the most endearing creature that could possibly be.

"And you have such a cheerful spirit!" he said, fondly. "You are like a bright light in the house."

"Am I truly, John?"

"Are you truly? Yes, indeed. Only much more, and much better."

"Do you know, John dear," said Bella, taking him by a button of his coat, "that I sometimes, at odd moments—don't laugh, John, please."

Nothing should induce John to do it, when she asked him not to do it.

"—That I sometimes think, John, I feel a little serious."

"Are you too much alone, my darling?"

"Oh dear, no, John! The time is so short that I have not a moment too much in the week."

"Why serious, my life, then? When serious?"

"When I laugh, I think," said Bella, laughing as she laid her head upon his shoulder. "You wouldn't believe, sir, that I feel serious now? But I do." And she laughed again, and something glistened in her eyes.

"Would you like to be rich, pet?" he asked her coaxingly.

"Rich, John! How can you ask such goose's questions?"

"Do you regret anything, my love?"

"Regret anything? No!" Bella confidently answered. But then, suddenly changing, she said, between laughing and glistening: "Oh yes, I do, though. I regret Mrs. Boffin."

"I, too, regret that separation very much. But perhaps it is only temporary. Perhaps things may so fall out, as that you may sometimes see her again—as that we may sometimes see her again." Bella might be very anxious on the subject, but she scarcely seemed so at the moment. With an absent air, she was investigating that button on her husband's coat, when Pa came in to spend the evening.

Pa had his special chair and his special corner reserved for him on all occasions, and—without disparagement of his domestic joys—was far happier there than anywhere. It was always pleasantly droll to see Pa and Bella together; but on this present evening her husband thought her more than usually fantastic with him.

"You are a very good little boy," said Bella, "to come unexpectedly as soon as you could get out of school. And how have they used you at school to-day, you dear?"

"Well, my pet," replied the cherub, smiling and rubbing his hands, as she sat him down in his chair, "I attend two schools. There's the Mincing Lane establishment, and there's your mother's Academy. Which might you mean, my dear?"

"Both," said Bella.

"Both, eh? Why, to say the truth, both have taken a little out of me to-day, my dear, but that was to be expected. There's no royal road to learning; and what is life but learning?"

"And what do you do with yourself when you have got your learning by heart, you silly child?"

"Why then, my dear," said the cherub, after a little consideration, "I suppose I die."

"You are a very bad boy," retorted Bella, "to talk about dismal things and be out of spirits."

"My Bella," rejoined her father, "I am not out of spirits. I am as gay as a lark." Which his face confirmed.

"Then if you are sure and certain it's not you, I suppose it must be I," said Bella; "so I won't do so any more. John dear, we must give this little fellow his supper, you know."

"Of course we must, my darling."

"He has been grubbing and grubbing at school," said Bella, looking at her father's hand and lightly slapping it, "till he's not fit to be seen. Oh what a grubby child!"

"Indeed, my dear," said her father, "I was going to ask to be allowed to wash my hands, only you find me out so soon."

"Come here, sir!" cried Bella, taking him by the front of his coat, "come here and be washed directly. You are not to be trusted to do it for yourself. Come here, sir!"

The cherub, to his genial amusement, was accordingly conducted to a little washing-room, where Bella soaped his face and rubbed his face, and soaped his hands and rubbed his hands, and splashed him and rinsed him and towelled him, until he was as red as beetroot, even to his very ears: "Now you must be brushed and combed, sir," said Bella, busily. "Hold the light, John. Shut your eyes, sir, and let me take hold of your chin. Be good directly, and do as you are told!"

Her father being more than willing to obey, she dressed his hair in her most elaborate manner, brushing it out straight, parting it, winding it over her fingers, sticking it up on end, and constantly falling back on John to get a good look at the effect of it. Who always received her on his disengaged arm, and detained her, while the patient cherub stood waiting to be finished.

"There!" said Bella, when she had at last completed the final touches. "Now, you are something like a genteel boy! Put your jacket on, and come and have your supper."

The cherub investing himself with his coat was led back to his corner—where, but for having no egotism in his pleasant nature, he would have answered well enough for that radiant though self-sufficient boy, Jack Horner—Bella with her own hands laid a cloth for him, and brought him his supper on a tray. "Stop a moment," said she, "we must keep his little clothes clean;" and tied a napkin under his chin, in a very methodical manner.

While he took his supper, Bella sat by him, sometimes admonishing him to hold his fork by the handle, like a polite child, and at other times carving for him, or pouring out his drink. Fantastic as it all was, and accustomed as she ever had been to make a plaything of her good father, ever delighted that she should put him to that account, still there was an occasional something on Bella's part that

was new. It could not be said that she was less playful, whimsical, or natural, than she always had been; but it seemed, her husband thought, as if there were some rather graver reason than he had supposed for what she had so lately said, and as if, throughout all this, there were glimpses of an underlying seriousness.

It was a circumstance in support of this view of the case, that when she had lighted her father's pipe, and mixed him his glass of grog, she sat down on a stool between her father and her husband, leaning her arm upon the latter, and was very quiet. So quiet, that when her father rose to take his leave, she looked round with a start, as if she had forgotten his being there.

"You go a little way with Pa, John?"

"Yes, my dear. Do you?"

"I have not written to Lizzie Hexam since I wrote and told her that I really had a lover—a whole one. I have often thought I would like to tell her how right she was when she pretended to read in the live coals that I would go through fire and water for him. I am in the humour to tell her so to-night, John, and I'll stay at home and do it."

"You are tired."

"Not at all tired, John dear, but in the humour to write to Lizzie. Good night, dear Pa. Good night, you dear, good, gentle Pa!"

Left to herself, she sat down to write, and wrote Lizzie a long letter. She had but completed it and read it over, when her husband came back. "You are just in time, sir," said Bella; "I am going to give you your first curtain lecture. It shall be a parlour-curtain lecture. You shall take this chair of mine when I have folded my letter, and I will take the stool (though you ought to take it, I can tell you, sir, if it's the stool of repentance), and you'll soon find yourself taken to task soundly."

Her letter folded, sealed, and directed, and her pen wiped, and her middle finger wiped, and her desk locked up and put away, and these transactions performed with an air of severe business sedateness, which the Complete British Housewife might have assumed, and certainly would not have rounded off and broken down in with a musical laugh, as Bella did: she placed her husband in his chair, and placed herself upon her stool.

"Now, sir! To begin at the beginning. What is your name?"

A question more decidedly rushing at the secret he was keeping from her, could not have astounded him. But he kept his countenance and his secret, and answered, "John Rokesmith, my dear."

"Good boy! Who gave you that name?"

With a returning suspicion that something might have betrayed him to her, he answered, interrogatively, "My godfathers and my godmothers, dear love?"

"Pretty good!" said Bella. "Not goodest good, because you hesitate about it. However, as you know your Catechism fairly, so far, I'll let you off the rest. Now, I am going to examine you out of my own head. John dear, why did you go back, this evening, to the question you once asked me before—would I like to be rich?"

Again, his secret! He looked down at her as she looked up at him, with her hands folded on his knee, and it was as nearly told as ever secret was.

Having no reply ready, he could do no better than embrace her.

"In short, dear John," said Bella, "this is the topic of my lecture: I want nothing on earth, and I want you to believe it."

"If that's all, the lecture may be considered over, for I do."

"It's not all, John dear," Bella hesitated. "It's only Firstly. There's a dreadful Secondly, and a dreadful Thirdly to come—as I used to say to myself in sermon-time when I was a very small-sized sinner at church."

"Let them come, my dearest."

"Are you sure, John dear; are you absolutely certain in your innermost heart of hearts—?"

"Which is not in my keeping," he rejoined.

"No, John, but the key is.—Are you absolutely certain that down at the bottom of that heart of hearts, which you have given to me as I have given mine to you, there is no remembrance that I was once very mercenary?"

"Why, if there were no remembrance in me of the time you speak of," he softly asked her with his lips to hers, "could I love you quite as well as I do; could I have in the Calendar of my life the brightest of its days; could I whenever I look at your dear face, or hear your dear voice, see and hear my noble champion? It can never have been that which made you serious, darling?"

"No, John, it wasn't that, and still less was it Mrs. Boffin, though I love her. Wait a moment, and I'll go on with the lecture. Give me a moment, because I like to cry for joy. It's so delicious, John dear, to cry for joy."

She did so on his neck, and, still clinging there, laughed a little when she said, "I think I am ready now for Thirdly, John."

"I am ready for Thirdly," said John, "whatever it is."

"I believe, John," pursued Bella, "that you believe that I believe—"

"My dear child," cried her husband gaily, "what a quantity of believing!"

"Isn't there?" said Bella, with another laugh. "I never knew such a quantity! It's like verbs in an exercise. But I can't get on with less believing. I'll try again. I believe, dear John, that you believe that I believe that we have as much money as we require, and that we want for nothing."

"It is strictly true, Bella."

"But if our money should by any means be rendered not so much—if we had to stint ourselves a little in purchases that we can afford to make now—would you still have the same confidence in my being quite contented, John?"

"Precisely the same confidence, my soul."

"Thank you, John dear, thousands upon thousands of times. And I may take it for granted, no doubt," with a little faltering, "that you would be quite as contented yourself, John? But, yes, I know I may. For, knowing that I should be so, how surely I may know that you would be so; you who are so much stronger, and firmer, and more reasonable and more generous, than I am."

"Hush!" said her husband, "I must not hear that. You are all wrong there, though otherwise as right as can be. And now I am brought to a little piece of news, my dearest, that I might have told you earlier in the evening. I have strong reason for confidently believing that we shall never be in the receipt of a smaller income than our present income."

She might have shown herself more interested in the intelligence; but she had returned to the investigation of the coat-button that had engaged her attention a few hours before, and scarcely seemed to heed what he said.

"And now we have got to the bottom of it at last," cried her husband, rallying her, "and this is the thing that made you serious?"

"No, dear," said Bella, twisting the button and shaking her head, "it wasn't this."

"Why then, Lord bless this little wife of mine, there's a Fourthly!" exclaimed John.

"This worried me a little, and so did Secondly," said Bella, occupied with the button, "but it was quite another sort of seriousness—a much deeper and quieter sort of seriousness—that I spoke of, John dear."

As he bent his face to hers, she raised hers to meet it, and laid her little right hand on his eyes, and kept it there.

"Do you remember, John, on the day we were married, Pa's speaking of the ships that might be sailing towards us from the unknown seas?"

"Perfectly, my darling!"

"I think among them there is a ship upon the ocean bringing to you and me a little baby, John."

CHAPTER VI.

A CRY FOR HELP.

THE Paper Mill had stopped work for the night, and the paths and roads in its neighbourhood were sprinkled with clusters of people going home from their day's labour in it. There were men, women, and children in the groups, and there was no want of lively colour to flutter in the gentle evening wind. The mingling of various voices and the sound of laughter made a cheerful impression upon the ear, analogous to that of the fluttering colours upon the eye. Into the sheet of water reflecting the flushed sky in the foreground of the living picture, a knot of urchins were casting stones, and watching the expansion of the rippling circles. So, in the rosy evening, one might watch the ever-widening beauty of the landscape—beyond the newly-released workers wending home—beyond the silver river—beyond the deep green fields of corn, so prospering, that the loiterers in their narrow threads of pathway seemed to float immersed breast-high—beyond the hedgerows and the clumps of trees—beyond the windmills on the ridge—away to where the sky appeared to meet the earth, as if there were no immensity of space between mankind and Heaven.

It was a Saturday evening, and at such a time the village dogs, always much more interested in the doings of humanity than in the affairs of their own species, were particularly active. At the general shop, at the butcher's and at the public-house, they evinced an inquiring spirit never to be satiated. Their especial interest in the public-house would seem to imply some latent rakishness in the canine character; for little was eaten there, and they, having no taste for beer or tobacco (Mrs. Hubbard's dog is said to have smoked, but proof is wanting), could only have been attracted by sympathy with loose convivial habits. Moreover, a most wretched fiddle played within; a fiddle so unutterably vile, that one lean long-bodied cur, with a better ear than the rest, found himself under compulsion at intervals to go round the corner and howl. Yet, even he returned to the public-house on each occasion with the tenacity of a confirmed drunkard.

Fearful to relate, there was even a sort of little Fair in the village. Some despairing gingerbread that had been vainly trying to dispose of itself all over the country, and had cast a quantity of dust upon its head in its mortification, again appealed to the public from an infirm booth. So did a heap of nuts, long, long exiled from Barcelona, and yet speaking English so indifferently as to call fourteen of themselves a pint. A Peep-show which had originally started with the Battle of Waterloo, and had since made it every other battle of later date by altering the Duke of Wellington's nose, tempted the student of illustrated history. A Fat Lady, perhaps, in part sustained upon postponed pork, her professional associate being a Learned Pig, displayed her life-size picture in a low dress as she appeared when presented at Court, several yards round. All this was a vicious spectacle as any poor idea of amusement on the part of the rougher hewers of wood and drawers of water in this land of England ever is and shall be. They