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MACMILLAN'S MAGAZINE.

MAY, 1869.

A BRAVE LADY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN."

> "Perhaps it may turn out a sang,
> Perhaps turn out a sermon."
> BURNS.

THE PROLOGUE.

IN most, nay, I think in all lives, is some epoch, which, looking back upon, we can perceive has been the turning-point of our existence,—a moment when the imagination first wakes up, the feelings deepen, and vague, general impressions settle into principles and convictions; when, in short, our bias for good or ill is permanently given. We may not recognise this at the time, but we do afterwards, saying to ourselves, either with thankfulness or regret, "But for such and such a thing, or such and such a person, I should not have been what I am."

This crisis befel me, Winifred Weston, when I was just entering my sixteenth year. It was not "falling in love," as in most cases it is;—and rightly, for love is, or ought to be, the strongest thing on earth; but it was equivalent to it, and upon me and the moulding of my character it had precisely the same effect. Nay, in a sense I did really fall in love, but it was a very harmless phase of the passion; for I was a commonplace damsel of sixteen, and the object of my intense admiration—nay, my adoring affection—was an old lady of seventy.

A young girl in love with an old woman! What a ridiculous form of the emotion, or sentiment! Not so ridiculous, my good friends, as at first appears; and by no means so uncommon as you suppose. I have known several cases of it besides my own: cases in which a great difference in years and character drew out, to a remarkable degree, that ideal worship and passionate devotedness which is at the root of all true love, first love especially. Laugh as you will, there is always a spice of nobleness in the boy who falls in love with his "grandmother," and I have often thought that one of the extenuating circumstances in the life of that selfish, pleasure-loving, modern heathen, Goethe, was the fact that in his old age he was so adored by a "child."

Nor does the character of the feeling alter when it is only a woman's towards a woman. I have loved a man, thank God, having found a man worth loving; but he well knows that for a long time he ranked second in my affections to a woman—to this woman, for whom my attachment had all the intensity of love itself.

She was, as I have said, quite old, even at the time when I first beheld her, which happened to be at church. Our pews were alongside of one another, for I sat in the rector's, and she in the one beyond. I was the new curate's daughter, and she was "the lady of the hall,"—Brierley Hall, the oldest and finest place in the neighbourhood. She entered alone. Many of the fine families of the parish always had a footman to carry their prayer-books, but she carried her own; walked alone, stately and slow, up the aisle, and took her seat in a corner of the large musty pew, the cushions and linings of which, once a rich crimson cloth, had faded with the sunshine of indefinite summers. They contrasted strongly with the black of her garments—black, but not sombre; her gown being of rich glittering silk, though she still wore a sort of widow's cap over her smooth, soft, white hair.

I knew who she was. Though my father and I had only been a week at Brierley, she was of sufficient importance there for us to have already heard about her—at least as much as the village generally knew. I had been told I should be sure to see her in church, the only place where she ever was seen in public; and she had been described to me so minutely that my excited curiosity could not fail to recognise her at once.

Even had it been otherwise, I think the result would have been all the same. It was to be, and it was; and I could not help it. I, the poor curate's daughter, motherless, romantic, solitary, brought up in the strictest seclusion, fell in love, desperately and determinedly, with this beautiful old lady—Lady de Bougainville.

It was such a remarkable name too, and so exactly suited to her appearance. Let me describe her if I can.

She had "high" features, as they are called—that is, her nose was aquiline, and the outline of her cheek and chin sharply and clearly cut; likewise her mouth, which, though delicate, had much decision in it. It was a sad and firm rather than a sweet mouth; or rather it seemed as if it had been meant to be sweet, but the experience of life had hardened it. Nevertheless, the old softness could and did at times return; I saw it afterwards, not then. Sadness also was the characteristic of her eyes—sadness, or at any rate pensiveness. They put me in mind of the sea after a storm, when the waves have calmed down, and the surface has grown smooth, or even broken out again into little necessary ripples: but you know all the while there must be, somewhere or other, many a broken spar floating about; many a cast-away treasure beaten against the beach; many a dead carcase of ancient grief rising up from the depths below. Such did rise—and I fancied I could see them—in the dark eyes of this my beautiful lady—the most beautiful, I still think, that I ever beheld, though she was a septuagenarian.

Even now, as I vainly try to describe her, I feel my old infatuation return—the delight with which I watched every curve of her features—pale, colourless features—as un-English and peculiar as her eyes; and admired every fold in her dress,—quite unlike any lady's dress I had ever seen. Her toilette was complete in all its details, as befitted both herself and her station. She was *chaussée et gantée* (the French best expresses what I mean; we English merely *put on* gloves and shoes) to perfection; and she had little hands and little feet—remarkably so for such a tall woman. She lost no inch of her height, and she carried her head like one who has never lowered it in shame or sycophancy before mortal man. "Aristocratic" undoubtedly would have been the adjective applied to her; but used in its right sense, as belonging to "the best" of the earth. There was nothing haughty about her, or repellent, or scornful—if these qualities are supposed to constitute aristocracy.

Her eyes and complexion, as I have

said, were very un-English; and when she began to say the responses, it was with a slight, a very slight accent—French, I thought; but in nothing else was she foreign. Her dress was the ordinary dress of an English widow, from whose weeds Time has melted away the obnoxious pomposity of crape, and allowed a faint mixture of white and grey with the black. But it was black still—no bugles—no trimmings—no ornamental fripperies, which always seem such a mockery of mourning. Her costume was perfectly plain, perfectly simple, yet exceedingly rich; as was justifiable in a lady whose wealth was, people said, very great, and who had not a creature to inherit it after her.

For Lady de Bougainville was that sad sight, a widowed wife—a mother left childless. In her solitary old age she kept her forlorn state in that huge house, which, many years ago, her husband, Sir Edward de Bougainville, had bought, rebuilt, lived in for a short time, and then died. Before then, by a succession of fatalities, her six children had died also. Thenceforward she, too, was as good as dead, socially speaking, to the little world of Brierley. She did not quit the Hall. She kept it up externally, much as before,—that is, none of the rooms were closed, and there was a sufficient establishment of servants. But she lived in it quite alone,—never visited anywhere, nor invited anybody to visit her. So she passed her days, and had passed them—our gossipping landlady told me—for twenty years and more, the wonder and curiosity of the neighbourhood—this poor, lonely, wealthy woman—the envied, pitied, much revered, much criticised Lady de Bougainville.

Those who revered her were the poor, to whom she was unlimitedly charitable: those who criticised her were the rich, the county families with whom she had long ceased to associate, and the new-comers whom she never sought to visit at all. These were naturally indignant that Brierley Hall should be shut up from them—that no dinner-parties should be given in the fine old dining-room where Charles II. was said to have taken a royal refection after hunting in the chace which surrounded the property. The younger generation likewise felt aggrieved that on such a beautiful lawn there should be no archery parties (croquet then was not), and no hope whatever of a ball in the tapestry-chamber, concerning which there were rumours without end; for none of the present generation had ever seen it.

Once things had been very different. While Sir Edward was rebuilding the Hall, he inhabited a house near, and lived in a style suitable to his fortune, while his wife and family mingled in all the best society of the neighbourhood. They were exceedingly popular, being a large merry family—handsome to look at, full of life and strength. Their father was less liked, being "rather queer," people said, somewhat unsocial, and always fancying himself a great invalid. But their mother shared in all their youthful enjoyments, and herself shone upon society like a star.—Vanished too, almost as suddenly; for after a certain grand ball—a house-warming which Sir Edward gave—and the splendours of which the elder generation in the village remembered still, the master of Brierley Hall fell really ill of some mysterious ailment. "Something amiss here, folk said," observed my informant, tapping her forehead; and after lingering, unseen by anybody, for many months, died, and was buried in Brierley churchyard. His monument, in plain white marble, without any of the fulsomeness common to epitaphs, was over his widow's head every Sunday as she sat in the Hall pew.

There, too, was a second tablet, equally simple in form and inscription, recording the names, ages, and dates of death of her six children. They had every one perished, some abroad, some at home, within a comparatively short space of time—dying off, as some families do die off, when all the probabilities seem in favour of their continuing to remote generations a prosperous, healthy, and honourable race. When I read the list of names on the white tablet, and glanced thence at the mother's face, I no longer wondered at its sad expression, or at those "peculiarities" —people called them—which had made her the talk of the village, until it grew weary of talking, and let her alone.

At first, in the early years of her desolation, her neighbours had made many attempts, some from curiosity, some from pure kindness, to break through her determined seclusion; but they failed. She was neither uncourteous nor ungrateful, but there was about her a silent repelling of all sympathy, which frightened the curious and wore out the patience of even the kindest-hearted of these intruders. She let them see, plainly enough, that their visits were an intrusion, and that it was her intention to reappear in society no more.

She never did. Except at church on Sundays, or driving out along the most unfrequented roads, in her handsome old-fashioned carriage, no one saw her beyond the limits of her own grounds. She was as little known as the Dalai Lama, and regarded with almost equal awe. Her smallest deeds were noticed, her lightest sayings recorded, and her very name uttered respectfully, as if she were a different person to the rest of the world.

She was. As I sat gazing at her during the whole of church-time, I felt that I never had seen, never should see, anybody like Lady de Bougainville.

It so happened that hitherto I had known very few women—that is, gentlewomen—partly because in the far-away parish where we had lived till we came here, there were only farmhouses, except the great house, which my father never let me enter. A certain sad prejudice he had—which I will no further allude to except to say that, though I was motherless, my mother was not dead—made him altogether avoid female society. He had brought me up entirely himself, and more like a boy than a girl: in my heart I wished I was a boy, and rather despised my own sex, until I saw Lady de Bougainville.

She, with her noble beauty, not weak, but strong; with her unmistakeable motherly air, not the feeble fondness which is little better than an animal instinct, but that large protecting tenderness which makes one ready to defend as well as cherish one's offspring: she seemed to me a real woman—a real mother. And all her children were dead!

I did not presume to pity her, but my heart was drawn towards her by something deeper than the fascination of the eye. The fancy of sixteen can take a pretty long Queen Mab's gallop in two hours: by the time service was over I seemed to have been "in love" with her for years.

She walked down the aisle a little before rather than after the rest of the congregation, quitting the church among not the genteel but the poor people, who curtsied to her and were acknowledged by her as she passed, but she made and received no other recognition. Alone as she came she departed, and alone she ascended her carriage—one of those chariots swaying about on springs, such as were in fashion thirty years ago, with hammercloth in front and dickey behind. Her footman handed her in, and shut the door upon her with a sharp click, and an air as solemnly indifferent as that of the undertaker who closes a coffin-lid upon some highly respectable corpse whose friends have quitted the house—as I hear in fashionable houses they always do; and her coachman then drove her off, the sole occupant of this handsome carriage, as slowly as if he were driving a hearse.

After all there was something pathetically funereal in this state, and I should have hated it, and turned away from it, had I not been so fascinated by Lady de Bougainville herself. She burst upon my dull life—craving for anything new—as an interest so vivid that it was an actual revelation. I went home, to think about her all day, to dream of her at night; I drew her profile—how perfect it was, even though it was an old woman's face!—among the sums on my slate, and along the margins of my Latin exercise-book. I kept my mind always on the *qui vive*, and my ears painfully open, to catch any floating information concerning her; but I was as shy of putting direct questions about her as if I had been a young man and she my first love. Do not laugh at me, you who read this; it is such a good thing to be "in love" with anybody. When we grow older we love in a quieter and more rational way; but even then we regard tenderly our early idolatries.

It seemed a long week till the next Sunday, and then I saw her again. Henceforward, from Sunday to Sunday, I lived in a suppressed suspense and longing,—sure to be satisfied then; for, fair weather or foul, Lady de Bougainville was always in her place at church. Only upon Sundays was my fancy "with gazing fed;" but it fattened so rapidly upon that *maigre* diet that I went through all the preliminary stages of a real love-fever. Most girls have it, or something like it, and it rather does good than harm, especially if the object is, as in my case, only a woman. Poor little lamb that she was—silly Winny Weston! I look back at her now as if she were some other person, and not myself; seeing all her faults, and all her good points too; and I beg it to be distinctly understood that I am not the least ashamed of her, or of her "first love," either.

That my idol should ever cast a thought towards me was an idea that never entered even my vivid imagination. She cast a glance occasionally,—that is, she looked over my head to the opposite wall, but I never supposed she saw me. However, this was of no consequence so long as I could see her, and speculate upon her, weaving long histories of which she was the heroine; histories over which I afterwards smiled to think how far they were from the truth! Then, having exhausted the past, I turned to the future, and amused myself with conjuring up endless probabilities and fortuitous circumstances which might cause Lady de Bougainville and myself to meet, or enable me to do some heroic action for her, with or without her knowledge—it did not matter much. Sometimes I pictured her horses starting off, and myself, little Winny Weston, catching hold of their bridles and preventing a serious accident; or some night there might arise a sudden gleam of fire among the trees whence peeped the chimneys of Brierley Hall, which I often watched from my bedroom window in the moonlight; and I pictured myself giving the alarm, and rushing to the spot just in time to save the house and rescue its aged mistress. Perhaps, after some such episode, she would just notice my existence, or, if I did anything very grand, would hold out her hand and say—in the same clear voice which every Sunday besought mercy upon "us miserable sinners," as if *she* could be a miserable sinner!—"Thank you, Winifred Weston." Suppose I actually saved her life—who knows? she might do even more—open her arms to my motherless but yearning heart, and whisper, "Winifred, be henceforth my child!"

All this was very silly and very melodramatic: yet it was better for me than many of the follies that one's teens are heir to—better than dancing and flirting into womanhood, buoyed up by the frothy admiration of raw young-manhood. It taught me to love, rather than to crave for being loved: and it taught me—if only through my imagination—two other things which I think the present generation rather loses sight of—heroism and patience.

That Lady de Bougainville herself was capable of both, I felt sure from her very face. The better I knew it, the more it fascinated me. It was an ideal face—nay, there was something in it absolutely historical, like one of those old portraits which you are convinced have a story belonging to them; or to which you may affix any story you please. Calm as it was, it was neither a stony nor impassive face. Often, when something in my father's sermon attracted her—he preached very good and original sermons sometimes—she would brighten up, and fix upon him her dark eyes—keen and clear as if they were twenty-five years old instead of seventy. But ordinarily she sat with them cast down; not in laziness, or pride, or scorn, but as if they were tired—tired of looking out upon the world for so many years. When lifted they had often a wistful and abstracted expression, as if she were living in times and places far away. As she said to me, months after, when I ventured to ask her what she did with herself—that is, when her daily work was done: "My dear, I dream. I have nothing to do but to dream."

What first put it into her mind to notice me I have even now not the slightest idea. I suppose it was nothing but the impulse of her own kind heart: when, missing me from my seat at church, she inquired about me, and who I was: finally, hearing I was ill—of that most unpoetical complaint the measles—she did as she was in the habit of doing to almost every sick person in the village, sent daily to inquire and to offer gifts. Only these gifts came at first rather from the gardens and vineries than the kitchen of Brierley Hall; until, some little bird having perhaps whispered to her that a poor curate often feeds not quite so well as a prosperous artisan, there appeared gradually jellies, soups, and other nourishing aliments. When I learnt from whence they came, I banquetted upon them as if they were the ambrosia of the earth.

But they did not cure me; and I had been fully five weeks absent from church, when one Monday morning—oh, that blessed Monday!—there came a little note to my father—a note on delicate-coloured paper, with a small black seal, in a handwriting diminutive, upright, firm—more like foreign than English caligraphy. I have it still:—

"Lady de Bougainville presents her compliments to the Rev. Henry Weston, and would esteem it a pleasure if he would trust his daughter to her for a week's visit. Brierley Hall was always considered a healthy place, and Lady de Bougainville has seen many sad instances of long ill-health, which a slight change of air at first might have cured. She will take the utmost care of the child" (here "the child" was crossed out, and "Miss Weston" inserted)—"if Mr. Weston will consent to part with her. A carriage shall fetch her at any hour to-day or to-morrow, so as to avoid all fatigue."

Most wonderful! The letter dropped from my trembling hands. Aladdin, Fortunatus, Cinderella—all those lucky youths and maidens befriended by fairies and good genii—were not more intoxicatingly happy than I.

"Father, you will let me go!" I cried. "Not to-day, perhaps" (for—it was a natural weakness—I suddenly remembered the state of my wardrobe; a condition not surprising in a poor curate's motherless daughter); "but to-morrow? You will send back word that I shall be ready by—let me see—by noon to-morrow?"

I always had everything pretty much my own way; so it was soon arranged that I should pay this—the first visit I had ever paid from home alone.

Young people who have many friends, and are always interchanging visits, can have no idea of the state of excitement I was in. It seemed to rouse me out of invalidism at once. To go anywhere—to anybody, would have been charming; but to Brierley Hall! it was ecstasy! To live under the same roof as my beautiful old lady—to see her every day in ordinary life—to be kindly noticed by her—to be able to render her various small services, such as a young person can so easily pay to an elder one: the cup of my felicity was full. It was worth being ill—twenty times over. I thought—I think still, and, while laughing at myself, it is with tears in my eyes—that the measles was a special interposition of Providence. Not in any worldly point of view. In spite of all my landlady's respectful and mysterious congratulations, I could see no special advantage likely to accrue to me from the visit; but I accepted it as a present delight; about which, and my own deservings of it, I did not speculate at all. In fact I took going to the Hall as naturally as I suppose I shall one day take going to heaven;—and it felt not unlike it.

My clothes were at first a serious

weight on my mind; they were so few, so poor, and—as, alas! I only now seemed to discover—so untidy. When I thought of Lady de Bougainville, her silks, velvets, and furs, the richness of which was almost forgotten in their exquisite neatness and appropriateness, my heart failed me. Well, she was rich and I was poor; but still that need not make such a vital difference. Even poor folk can contrive to keep their garments clean and whole. I must try to turn over a new leaf from this day forward.

So I mended and arranged, folded and packed, wishing faintly that I could put some womanly orderliness into my too boyish ways; and this practical occupation kept my head steadily balanced, and levelled a little the heights and depths of excitement, the alternations of eager expectation and shyness almost amounting to fear, which came upon me. Yet the whole of the day I was in a fever of delight. I tried to hide it, lest my father should think I was glad to leave him, this first time in my life that I ever had left him. But it was not that at all; it was no carelessness to old ties, only the dawning instinct for new ones—the same instinct which prompts the young bird to creep to the edge of even the warmest and safest nest, and peer over into the unknown world beyond. It may be a cold world—a dangerous, fatal world, wherein, many a day yet, we may wander about shivering, and long regretfully for the nest left behind. But for all that we cannot stay in the nest: God gives us wings, and when they grow we must use them; whatever it costs us, we must learn to fly.

Nevertheless, when I had bidden my father good-bye—as solemn a good-bye as if I had been bound for the Antipodes—and sat alone in the Hall carriage, my heart failed me a little. Luxury was so new to me, I was half frightened by it. Yet was I not well-born? Had not my forefathers driven about in carriages quite as grand as this one? Besides, in my still feeble health, the easy equipage, rolling lazily and smoothly along, gave me rather a pleasurable sensation. After the first minute or two I began to believe in the reality of my felicity; and Aladdin as he rubbed his lamp, Cinderella as she leaned back in her pumpkin chariot, were not more full of happy hope than I.

As we drove through the village, and people stared at the Hall equipage passing at an unwonted hour, I first sat bolt upright in it, with a conscious pleasure that everybody should see me there; then I scorned myself for the mean vanity. It was better to hide my happiness in the deep of my heart, and the darkest corner of the carriage: so I leaned back, saying to myself in proud delight, "Nobody knows—nobody knows." For it seemed to me that the whole world, if they did know it, would envy me, thus going on a visit to Lady de Bougainville.

We reached the lodge-gates. I had often peeped through them at the mysterious region beyond, where the fine red-brick mansion glimmered through the green of the long elm-avenue; and the trees which dotted the park cast their shadows on the smooth turf—making a picture which sometimes reminded me of the garden of the Hesperides.

Now, however, the gates flew open, and a very commonplace gardener's wife admitted us into the enchanted ground. It was such—it always will be such to me. As the carriage rolled slowly between those two lines of patriarchal elms, just dressing themselves anew in the soft green of early spring, I felt that the modern villas starting up around us so fatally fast, snug and smug, four-square, Portland-cemented, with newly-painted palisades, and araucarias and deodaras stuck here and there in the fresh-made lawn, were no more to compare with Brierley Hall, than were their occupants, fat and well-to-do gentlemen, highly-dressed and highly-respectable ladies, with *my* Lady de Bougainville.

Could that be herself standing at the door? No, of course not; how could I have imagined such a condescension?

Nevertheless, it was a friendly-smiling and pleasant person—a lady's maid, but not the elderly Abigail one might have expected. Curiously enough, the domestics at Brierley Hall were, except one, all young servants.

"My lady says, Miss, that I am to take you straight to your bedroom, and see that you lie down and rest there till dinner-time—six o'clock. You shall have a cup of tea directly."

I often fancy people know not half the mysteries of personal influence; and how curiously they themselves are reflected in their servants. This young woman—who was as civil as if I had been the Honourable Winifred Weston, come on a visit with my own maid and a heap of luggage—took from me my small portmanteau, led the way across a wide hall, of which in my bewildered nervousness I only saw a glimmer of painted glass, green marble pillars and polished oaken floors, up a beautiful staircase, and into a warm, fire-lit bedroom.

We all have our ideals, and this will be my ideal bed-chamber to the end of my days. It was not large, at least not too large to feel cosy; and it was made still smaller by a subdivision: an arch, supported on Corinthian pillars, behind which was the bed and all the toilet apparatus, making a clear distinction between the sleeping and the social half of the room. In the latter, collected snugly round the hearth, were a sofa, a table, writing materials, books; a little encampment, on which the fire blazed welcomely, this chilly, grey, spring day. Above it, inserted into the wainscotted wall, was a curious oil painting, half length, life-sized, of some old saint. From the unkempt hair and beard, the leathern girdle, and the robe of camel's hair, I concluded it was John the Baptist. A strange fancy to have him there, gazing with wan face, and gleaming, reproachful eyes that seemed ever crying "Repent ye," upon the luxuries of the room.

It appeared luxurious to me, for I had never beheld one anything equal to it. I was half amused, half annoyed, to see how many necessaries of civilized life I had hitherto done without: toilette appliances of mysterious kind; endless drawers, closets, and shelves in which to stow away my poor property; mirrors and hand-glasses, reflecting everywhere my humble person, gaunt with the awkwardness of my age, ill-dressed, unlovely. Then the bed, which was of foreign make, with a graceful canopy, rich damask hangings, and a counterpane of quilted silk. How could I ever go to sleep in it?

At first, I own, my novel position quite frightened me. But when I had drank my tea, unpacked myself—declining assistance through sheer shame—and arranged my garments as carefully and as widely as I could upon their numerous receptacles, after having taxed my mother-wit to the utmost in discovering the uses of all these things, so as not to be disgraced in the eyes of housemaid or lady's-maid, then I took heart of grace. I said to myself, "Winny Weston, you are a fool. All these things are mere externalities. They could not make you a lady, if you were not one; and, if you are, the lack of them will not unmake you. Pluck up your courage, and do the best you can."

So I curled myself up comfortably on the sofa, and lay gazing at the delicious fire. Ah, that luxury, the permanent bedroom fire! I had never been allowed it yet; it never would have occurred to me to have it, except in case of illness; but here it was apparently the custom of the house, and any one of a solitary, shy nature can best appreciate the intense comfort, the delicious peace, of being able to shut one's door upon all the world, and warm one's soul and body thoroughly at one's own particular bedroom fire.

Lady de Bougainville had done a kind thing in leaving me to myself until dinner-time. But to "lie down and rest," according to her orders, which the maid had given with an air as if nobody ever was expected to gainsay anything the mistress said—was impossible; rest is for a later period of life than mine. In an hour I had exhausted all the delights of fireside meditation, all the interest of my room, including the views from my two windows, and was dying with curiosity to penetrate further.

I opened the door and peeped out, as timidly as a young mouse on her travels. All was silent, as silent as Tennyson's Sleeping Palace. Why should I not creep downstairs, just to examine the staircase and hall?

I delight in a fine wide staircase; it is the lungs of a house. I am sure people who plan grand reception rooms with narrow ascents thereto, must have rather narrow minds. The planner of this had not. As I looked over the balustrade of carved oak—carved as beautifully as Grinling Gibbons could have done it—and then upwards to the circular ceiling, over which flying Cupids were hanging wreaths, and downwards to the broad, polished stairs, winding step after step in smooth dignified progression—I thought of the lovely ladies passing up and down it with their sweeping trains, their high head-dresses, like that in my great-grandmother's portrait; escorted by gentlemen — such gentlemen as was Sir Charles Grandison. And I thought then—I fear I think now—that these were far finer specimens of humanity, inside and outside, than the young men and women whom I shall meet at the next dinner party I go to, or have to see flirting with my sons and daughters—when old enough—at the next ball.

Descending, I gazed left and right across the hall, which ran right through the centre of the house from door to door. Great windows lit it at either end, large panes of stained glass, forming shapes not unlike crosses: one scarlet and blue—the sacred colours, such as old painters always gave to their Madonnas—the other violet and green. Supporting the hall in the middle were double pillars of scagliola marble; its walls were of some soft grey papering, with Pompeian figures grouped here and there; and across the wide space of its dark oak floor ran rivers of carpeting, cutting it up a little, but just enough to make it safe. Only French feet can glide across those slippery plains of polished wood, beautiful as they are. Mine failed me more than once; and in the perfect silence and solitude I felt—not altogether comfortable, yet deliciously, ecstatically happy.

There is a belief among modern psychologists—one of whom has lately developed it in a novel—that we are none of us wholly individual or original beings, but made up of our countless antecedents — of whose natures, combined or conflicting, we partake, and often feel them struggling within us. As if we were not ourselves at all, but somebody else—some far-back progenitor whose soul was new-born into our infant body, to work us weal or woe, and influence us more or less throughout life,—a creed not more impossible or ridiculous than many other scientific theories.

As I stood for the first time in this house, gradually it seemed to become familiar and natural. Large and fine as it was, it was *a house*, not a baronial residence. In it I felt myself a mere drop of water, but it was water conscious of rising to its level. The soul of my great-grandmother seemed to enter into me; and I thought in my silly, childish heart, that if I only had a train I could sweep up the beautiful staircase with as grand an air as she. Ay, and enjoy it too. So absorbed was I in my foolish dream, that I drew myself up to my full height, and shook out my scanty cotton frock, trying to imagine myself one of those ladies, like what my great-grandmother must have been—my beautiful great-grandmother, whose miniature with the rose in her hair I knew so well.

At that luckless moment I heard an outer door open—and in walked Lady de Bougainville.

I knew it was she, though she looked, of course, in her home dress and garden wraps different from what she looked in church. But she was one of those people who seem to make their costume instead of their costume making them. Whatever she had on, she was sure to be the same.

I half hoped her eye would not discover me, but I was mistaken. She came forward at once.

"Is that you, my little visitor?" and she put out her hand—her old soft hand, the softest, I think, I ever felt, though it was withered and thin, so that the jewelled rings hung loosely on every finger—"I thought you were safe resting in your room. What have you been doing?—Where were you going?"

Sweet as her voice was—sweet as when uttering the responses in church—there was in it the tone of the mistress and mother, accustomed all her life to be answered and obeyed.

I answered at once—though in a hot agony of confusion, which makes me even now pity myself to remember—"I was not going anywhere, my lady."

She smiled. "Don't say 'my lady,' the servants only do that. If you call me 'ma'am'—as I was taught to say to my elders when I was a girl—it will do quite well."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And what shall I call you? Miss Weston, or simply Winifred?"

"Winifred, please, ma'am—nothing but Winifred!" cried I, my delight suddenly making me bold. Then I shrank back into myself with a wild collapse of shame.

She took no notice of it, except just to pat me on the shoulder, saying, "Very well, Winifred:" and then began asking a courteous question or two about my father. So my heart, which had at first beat in my bosom like a little steam-engine, slowly quieted itself down, and I recovered sufficiently to be able to look up in my hostess's face, to hear and answer intelligently, and even to take in the minutiæ of her dress and appearance.

What a picture of an old lady she was! If all old ladies did but know the wisdom of recognising the time when a woman should cease following fashion's changes, except in a very modified form, and institute, so far as she can, a permanent costume! Lady de Bougainville's was charming. Not exactly old-fashioned; neither of this year nor that year, nor the year before, but suited to all years, and looking well at all seasons. It was excessively simple, consisting only of a black silk gown, without trimmings of any sort, but the material was so rich and good that none were required. It fitted her figure—which was slender and straight, even at seventy years of age; and she was so upright that walking behind her you might have taken her for a woman of thirty. At throat and wrists she had a sort of frill, made of fine cambric and Valenciennes lace. Over her widow's cap was drawn a garden-hood or *capuchon*, such as Frenchwomen wear. A French shawl, of fine soft black merino, fell round her in comfortable folds. Indeed, there was something about her toilette essentially French. We had happened to live three months in that country—my father and I—just before we came to Brierley, so I was able to detect this fact; and also a small *soupçon* of an accent which developed itself more the more she spoke, and gave her speech, as a slight foreign accent always gives to otherwise correct English, a certain pretty individuality.

As she stood before me, and talked to me, in her ordinary home dress, and upon ordinary subjects, but looking none the less stately and beautiful than she had done in church for Sunday after Sunday, I felt as bewildered and enrapt as would a poor little nun who suddenly sees the Virgin Mary or St. Catherine step down from her niche, and become every-day womanhood.

When I had grown a little less afraid of her, and had succeeded in answering all her questions—very harmless, commonplace questions, about my father's health and my own, but given with a kind of tender graciousness, and an earnestness over the replies, which great people do not always show to little people,—she put to me a second inquiry, or rather a repetition of the first, which frightened me as much as ever.

For I felt it must be answered, and truly, even if untruth had occurred to me as one way of getting out of the difficulty;—which it did not.

Lying usually springs from cowardice, and, girl as I was, I had never yet been afraid of any mortal soul. So when Lady de Bougainville asked, with a covert smile, what I was doing when she caught sight of me, I confessed, silly as I knew the confession must make me appear—

"I was trying to walk upstairs as if I had a train. I wanted to fancy myself my great-grandmother."

"And who was your great-grandmother?" asked she, laughing a little, but not in the way I had expected and feared.

"A very beautiful woman, I believe, and very rich."

"Ah!" drawing back at once, "I thought your family was poor?"

"So it is now, but it was not always." And I explained to her one or two traditions of the departed glory of the Westons, on which my imagination had always hung with great delight. To which she listened without comment, and apparently without being affected with them in any way; then asked,

"And your great-grandmother?"

"She was," I repeated, "a very beautiful woman; and she lived in a house which I suppose must have been much like yours. I was wondering how she felt in it."

"Indeed. Then, Winifred, would you have liked to be your great-grandmother?"

I stopped to consider, for I could not bear to speak inaccurately, even at random. "For some things I should, ma'am; not for all."

"Why not for all?"

"I have heard she was not a very happy woman."

"Few women ever are very happy," said, with a slight sigh, which amazed me as much as her words, Lady de Bougainville.

Of course, I did not presume to reply; and immediately afterwards she changed the subject entirely, and began to speak to me about my own health, and the arrangements she had made for me in her house, with a view to my deriving as much benefit from the change as possible. Her questions, suggestions, and advices were all extremely practical and minute, even to the most motherly degree. I did not know what motherhood was then—the tie, both ways, from child to mother and from mother to child, was to me a perfect blank; but I had sense enough to have guessed instinctively, even had I not known the fact, that she who thus spoke to me had been the mother of many children; and that the heart once opened, in a way that only motherhood does open it, nothing afterwards could altogether close. Her very eyes, as they rested upon me, had a pensive tenderness in them, as if beyond my face they saw another. Some women have that expression whenever they look at a child; it reminds them either of the dead or the lost—or, perhaps as sadly, of the never born.

I answered obediently my hostess's questions, though they surprised me a little. I mean, it was puzzling to find out that my idol was not too ideal to condescend to such ordinary things; in fact, was much more of a mortal woman than I expected. She appeared to me now not so much a mediæval saint as a wise, sensible mother of a family, something like that most sensible and capable woman in the Proverbs, whose portrait, transmitted to us from distant ages, proves that the Hebrews at least had some notion of what a woman ought to be, and did not accept as their notion of feminine perfection a charming, amiable, beautiful—fool!

Looking closer at Lady de Bougainville, it was easy to detect under all her refinement an amount of strength which circumstances might drive into actual hardness; while against her high, pure, lofty nature might be laid the charge which inferior natures often do lay, that she could not understand them, and had no pity for them. May be so! In her clear, bright, honest eyes lurked the possibility of that cutting contempt for all things weak, and base, and double-faced, which a mean person would find difficult to meet; and the delicate line of her lips could settle into a mouth, firm enough to shame all cowards—a mouth like my pet heroine, Catherine Seyton's, when she put her slender right arm as a bar through the bolts of the door, to protect those who needed her protection. Lady de Bougainville, I was sure, would have done the same any day.

I was not old enough fully to take in her character then, and I greatly fear that in many things I write about her now, I am giving not so much my impressions of the time as my observations and convictions of a later period; but, child as I was, I could appreciate that force of nature which was able to deny as well as bestow, to blame as much as to praise.

She blamed me unequivocally for having disobeyed her orders, and quitted my room, and would not listen for a moment to my excuses, which in their earnest honesty seemed to amuse as well as please her:—that I was longing to go all over her beautiful house, the biggest and most beautiful I had ever seen in my life.

"Indeed. Yours must have been a quiet life, then, child. What sort of home did you live in?"

"In no home at all," I said mournfully, "only in furnished lodgings. And oh, if you did but know what it is to spend month after month, year after year, in furnished lodgings!"

She smiled. "Then you have never been anything but poor, my dear? Is it so?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That is right, that is honest. Poverty is no shame; the shame is for those who think it so, or fear to acknowledge it. Still it is a hard thing to bear sometimes."

"Indeed I have found it so," cried I, warmed up by this unexpected sympathy. "I don't like it at all, but I bear it."

Lady de Bougainville laid her hand, her delicate dear old hand, upon my head. "Poor little thing," she murmured: "*pauvre petite.*" But the minute she had let fall the latter words, she turned away from me. I did not know till long afterwards that she had been in the habit of speaking French to her children.

Presently she addressed me with a sudden and quite uncalled-for asperity of tone.

"So you are poor, Winifred, and you would like to be rich. Do not deny it. I hate prevarication—I despise shams. Say outright, you foolish child, that you wish you were in my place, and lived at the Hall,—perhaps even were mistress of it, as I am, and have been these many years. What a fortunate, happy woman I must be!"

There was a keen sarcasm in her voice which actually startled me; but immediately she became conscious that she was speaking in a way quite unsuitable for a child to hear, and quite incomprehensible to most children. Only I think that we who have spent our childhood either with grown people or quite alone, get a certain precocity of intuition, sharper and more accurate than is supposed. I should have been acute enough at guessing much concerning Lady de Bougainville had I not been frightened by her witch-like faculty of divining what was passing in my own mind. For I was painfully conscious of having done exactly as she said, and broken the tenth commandment over and over again that morning.

"Do not blush so," she went on. "You have done nothing very heinous, child, even if you have wished to step into my shoes, or to inherit my fortune and estate. I should consider such a fancy neither wicked nor unnatural at your age. Only if it really happened I should be very sorry for you."

"Sorry!"

Her hand, firmer in its grasp than I could have thought possible to such soft fingers, was pressed on my shoulder; and her dark eyes, no longer wild, but piercing, penetrated down to the very depths of mine: "Now, child, pay attention to me for a minute, that we may begin our acquaintance on a sure footing. You are nothing to me, and

I am nothing to you, except that I was sorry for you, as seventy is sorry for sixteen. But I see you are of a very imaginative temperament, as full of romantic notions as any girl of sixteen can be, and I know what that is—I was sixteen myself once. But I warn you, Winifred, build no castles in Spain at Brierley Hall. Do not fancy, because I invited you here to nurse you well again, and send you back home fit to battle with life, as is your lot, that I have taken a mysterious interest in you, and intend to adopt you, and make you my heiress."

"Ma'am! Lady de Bougainville!"

She had been sitting on one of the hall chairs, and I on the staircase in front of her; but now I started up, and looked her full in the face. Child as I was, my indignation made me a woman for the moment—a woman, and her equal. I did not condescend even to rebut her accusation; I stood a minute, feeling myself grow hot and hotter, to the very roots of my hair, and then I darted away, and rushed violently upstairs.

"Winifred, child, where are you running to?"

"To fetch my bonnet. I am going home."

But in the effort of speech I broke down, and before I reached my room door I had only strength to totter in and bury my head in the sofa cushions in a paroxysm of tears.

How long they lasted I do not know, but my first consciousness was a kind, cool hand on my head, and a soft voice calling me by my name. Lady de Bougainville was standing over me, looking grave and grieved, but not displeased at all. Nor amused, as many persons would have been, at this passion of almost ludicrous anger in a young girl, little more than a child. She held out her hand, smiling.

"I was mistaken, I see. Do not take it so seriously to heart. May not an old woman talk nonsense if she likes?"

"It was nonsense then? You did not really think I came here with such ideas in my head? You do not suppose me capable of such meanness? I don't say," continued I, for in all my wrath I was still candid; "I don't say that I should not like to be as rich as you—I should; and I have thought so many a time this day. But I never wanted *your* riches. Keep them yourself! For me, I despise them."

"So do I," she said, with an air of gentleness, even sadness, which to me was then wholly unaccountable.

She added no other word, but stood by me, firmly holding my hand, and looking down on me with a curious mixture of interest and compassion, until my sobs abated. But the result of the storm of indignation into which I had thrown myself, was, as might be expected for one just recovering from severe illness, anything but satisfactory. I fell into a sort of hysterical state, which soon made me quite incapable of going downstairs, or even of stirring from my sofa. My hostess tended me there, fetching no servant, but taking all the trouble of me upon herself for two or three hours;—of which I remember little, except that she seemed to be quite another person than my preconceived idea of her. She soothed me, she scolded me, she made me take food and medicine; finally she put me to bed like a baby, and sat beside me, reading or pretending to read, till I fell asleep. I did not wake till broad daylight next morning.

It was a delicious waking—like dawn after a thunder-storm. My window faced the east, and the early sun looked in; while, without, the birds sang their cheerful songs with the especial loudness that one hears on a spring morning. I felt tired, and not quite myself, but scarcely ill. In truth, I hated to be ill, or to be kept in bed one minute longer than necessary. So before any one could restrain me, I had leaped out, and was already up and dressed when a knock came to my door. It was the maid, entering with my breakfast.

I was a little disappointed that it was only the maid, but I got a message, at all events.

"My lady wishes to know if you are better, Miss? and, if you are, she will not disturb you till noon. She herself is always busy of a morning."

Was it out of consideration for me and my shyness, or had my tender, motherly nurse of the night before changed back into my idol of the church pew—my noble, stately, reserved, and unapproachable Lady de Bougainville? I could not tell, but I accepted my lot, whatever it was. I implicitly obeyed her; and, though the imprisonment was dreadful, I did not stir from my room until the cuckoo-clock on the chimney-piece—oh, how I love a cuckoo-clock!—had struck twelve. Then out I darted, to snatch, eager and happy, at the delights that lay before me.

Not quite happy though, for it struck me that I had made a goose of myself the previous evening; but still this little episode, so uncomfortable and so unexpected, had had one good result—it had broken down the barrier between my idol and me, had taken away my dread of her, and put a certain sympathy between us, in spite of the alarming difference of our years. How or why I did not know, not till long afterwards; but I felt it was so. Still, when once again I descended the stairs—not making such a little fool of myself as heretofore, but walking sagely and rationally, like a respectable young lady—and saw, as yesterday, that tall black figure entering in from the garden door, my heart beat a little with the old throb—half pleasure, half awe, but wholly love. I wonder if any man ever loved the sight of me as I did that of this lovely old woman?

She advanced with her smiling welcome, formal a little, but always smiling. I came afterwards to know what a better welcome was, to have her arms round my neck, and her kiss on my cheek; but I like to remember the earlier welcomes,—just the simple handshake, and the kindly inquiry, written at once on lips and eyes. Some people say "How do you do?" and never wait to hear the answer, which you can omit altogether, if you choose—they will never miss it. But she always looked as if she liked to hear—as if she really was interested in learning how you were and what you were doing—as if the large sympathy which even seventy years had neither narrowed nor dulled, took an interest in every minute thing you could tell her, and cared for your fortunes as if they had been her own.

After an inquiry or two, which she saw rather shamed and confused me, she ceased speaking of the little episode of last night, and took up the thread of our acquaintance precisely where we had left it yesterday.

"You were wanting to see my house; shall I show it you now? There will be quite time before luncheon."

"Will it not tire you too much?" For I noticed that she looked extremely pale, and the dark circles under her eyes were deeper, as if she had been awake all night.

"Are you tired, Winifred?"

"Oh no, thank you, ma'am."

"Then never mind me. When I was young, I used to be told I was a Spartan," added she, smiling; "and I try to be something of a Spartan still, in spite of my age. I could never endure to sink into the invalid or doting old woman. I hope I shall manage to die like that grand old philosopher who in his last moment started up from his arm-chair, and said 'he would die standing.'"

She would, I thought, as I looked at her, so erect still, with her feet planted firmly, and her eyes flashing bright.

I said, with a conceited sense of my own erudition, that there was something very fine in dying, like Macbeth, "with harness on one's back."

Lady de Bougainville looked amused. "You read Shakspeare, I see?"

"Oh, I read everything."

"Everything is a large word. Now, I have read very little in my life. I am not at all an educated person."

I stared in utter amazement.

"It is quite true, my dear; or rather, for educated I should have said 'learned' or 'cultivated.' We get our education in many other ways besides reading books. But come, you will be more interested in my house than in me."

"Are you not very fond of your house, ma'am?"

"Perhaps I am. I like to have things suitable and beautiful about me. Pretty things were always good company to me: now they are the only company I have."

Then it was quite true that she received no one; that I was the sole guest who had been admitted into these precincts for years? I could hardly credit my own good fortune. And when I went with her, from room to room, talking familiarly, and hearing her talk—which was the greatest treat of all—I was almost bewildered with my happiness.

Her home seemed so completely a portion of herself, that in telling of her I cannot help telling of it likewise, and should like to describe it minutely.

It was a house such as was used to be built by the landed gentry a century or two ago, just when the type of Elizabethan houses—poetical, but not too comfortable—was merging into that of modern convenience: convenience degenerating into luxury. It was not Gothic at all—had no queer corners—its general plan being four-square; the four reception rooms making the outside angles, with the large central hall between. Some people might say it was not a picturesque house, but it was what I call an honest house; in which everything feels real, substantial, and sound; well built, well ventilated; with high ceilings and airy passages, giving one breathing room and walking room; plenty of windows to see out of, and snug recesses to creep into; warm solid walls, and wide hospitable fireplaces: in short, a house containing every requisite for a home and a family—a large, merry, happy household—contented in itself, and on good terms with the world outside. And in it Lady de Bougainville lived—all alone.

She took me from room to room, explaining the plan of the whole house, and showing me the ground-floor apartments; drawing-room, dining-room, morning-room, library. All were in perfect order: even the fires laid in the grates, ready to be kindled in a moment, to welcome a large family, or a houseful of guests. And then we went slowly up the beautiful staircase, and she pointed out the exquisite oak carvings, the painted panels, and highly-decorated ceilings; telling me how they had been found covered up with plaster, whitewash, and other barbarisms of the last century; what pains she had taken to disinter them, and restore them to their original state. In describing, she regarded them with a curious tenderness—like one who has grown fond of inanimate objects—probably from having long had only inanimate objects to love.

I ventured no questions; but I must have looked them, for once, turning suddenly to me, she said:

"I dare say you think this a large house for one old woman to live in—large and gloomy and empty. But it does not feel empty to me. When one has lived seventy years, one is sure to have, whether alone or not, plenty of companions; and it depends much upon oneself whether they are pleasant company or not. I am quite content with mine. No, I did not mean ghosts"—(seeing, doubtless, a shade of slight apprehension on my face, for, like all imaginative, solitary children, I had suffered horribly from supernatural fears.) "I assure you, Winifred, my house is not haunted; I have no ghosts; at least, none that you will see. Besides, you are too much of a woman to have a child's sillinesses. How old did you say you were? I forget."

I told her, sixteen.

"I was married the day I was six teen."

Then for fifty-four years she must have been Lady de Bougainville. I longed to inquire further; to find out what her maiden name was, what her husband had been like, and how they fell in love with one another. They must have been such young lovers, for I had discovered, by arithmetical calculations from the date on his monument, that he was only about five years older than she. How I longed to hear it—this love-story of half a century ago;

interesting and delicious as all love-stories are to girls of my age, eager to go the way their mothers and grandmothers went, only believing that with themselves the great drama of life would be played out in a far higher manner: as it never has been played before.

I craved for even a word or two concerning the past to fall from those lips —what sweet lips they must have been when, at only sixteen, they repeated the marriage vows!—but none did fall. The love-story never came. And, kind as she was, there was something about my hostess which at once excited and repressed curiosity. What she chose to reveal, of her own accord, was one thing; but to attempt to extract it from her was quite another. You felt that at the first daring question she would wither you with her cold rebuke, or in her calm and utterly impassive courtesy speak of something else, as if she had never heard you. The proof-armour of perfect politeness—as smooth and glittering as steel, and as invulnerable—was hers, to a degree that I never saw in any other woman.

Though from the very beginning of our acquaintance, either from some instinctive sympathy, or from the natural tendency of old age to go back upon its past, especially to the young, with whom it can both reveal and conceal as much as it chooses, Lady de Bougainville often let fall fragments of her most private history, which an ingenious fancy could easily put together and fit in, so as to arrive at the truth of things—a much deeper truth than she was aware of having betrayed—still, in all my relations towards her I never dared to ask her a direct question. She would have repelled and resented it immediately.

So, even on this first day, I had the sense to be content with learning no more than she condescended to tell me: in fact I did little else than follow her about the house, and listen while she talked.

Her conversation at once charmed and puzzled me. It was more "like a book," as the phrase is, than any person's I had ever met; yet it sounded neither stilted nor affected. It was merely that, from long isolation, she expressed herself more as people write or think than as they talk. This, not because she was very learned—I believe she was quite correct in saying she had never been a highly-educated woman—the cleverness in her was not acquired, but original; just as her exquisite refinement was not taught, but inborn. Yet these two facts made her society so interesting. Conversing with her and with every-day people was as different as passing from Shakspeare to the daily newspaper.

It was impossible that such an influence should not affect a girl of my age and disposition—suddenly, decisively, overwhelmingly. I still recall, with an intoxication of delight, that soft spring morning, that sunny spring afternoon—for, luncheon over, we went wandering about the house again—when I followed her like a dog from room to room, growing every hour more fascinated, and attaching myself to her with that dog-like faithfulness, which some one (whom I need not now refer to, but who knows me pretty well by this time) says is a part of my nature. Well, well, never mind! It might be better, and it might be worse—for me and for others—that I have this quality. I do not think it was the worse, at any rate, for her—my dear Lady de Bougainville.

I fancy she rather liked having even a dog-like creature tracking her steps, and looking up in her face,—she had been alone so long. Old as she was, and sad as her life must have been, by nature she was certainly a cheerful-minded person. There was still a curious vitality and elasticity about her, as if in her heart she liked being happy, and seeing other people the same.

She especially enjoyed my admiration of the tapestry-room, a large *salon*—the French would call it; and the word dropped out of her own lips unawares, convincing me more and more of what I did not dare to inquire—her French extraction. She told me, when she first came to Brierley Hall, which had been bought from the Crown, to whom the estate had fallen due, after two centuries of wasteful possession by the heirs of some valiant soldier, to whom a grateful monarch had originally presented it,—this room was covered with the commonest papering, until some lucky hole made her discover underneath what looked like tapestry. Further search laid bare six beautiful pieces of work, in perfect preservation, let into the wall like pictures: just as they hung there now, in the soft faded colouring which gives to old tapestry a look at once so beautiful, and tender, and ghostly; as if one saw hovering over every stitch the shadow of the long-dead fingers that sewed it.

"How glad you must have been," I said, "when you tore down the horrid papering, and found out all this."

"Yes, I was very glad. I liked all old things. Besides," she went on, "the tapestry is fine in itself; Vandyke even might have designed it. Possibly one of his pupils did: it seems about that period. See, how well they are drawn, these knights and ladies, kings and queens, foresters with their falcons, horsemen with their steeds. Such a whirl as it is, such numerous figures, so life-like, and so good!"

"And what does it all mean, ma'am?"

"Nobody knows; we have never been able to make out. In some things it might answer to the story of Columbus. Here is a man like him coming before a king and queen—Ferdinand and Isabella; they are sitting crowned, you see; and then this looks like his meeting with them afterwards, laden with the riches of the New World. But all is mere guess-work; we have no data to go upon. We used to guess endlessly about our new tapestry the first year, then we accepted it as it was, and guessed no more. But think"——and she stood gazing dreamily at these faint-coloured, shadowy, life-size figures, which seemed to make the wall alive—"think of all the years it took the artist to design, the sempstresses to complete that tapestry, and how their very names are forgotten—nay, we cannot even find out what their handiwork meant to portray! They and it are alike ghosts, as we all shall be soon. 'Man goeth about like a shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain.'"

"Yes," I said; and with the "priggishness" of youth, being conceited over my knowledge of the Bible, I added the remainder of the text: "'he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.'"

The moment I had uttered the words I felt that I had made a mistake—more than a mistake, it was an actual cruelty; one of those chance stabs that we sometimes give to the people we love best, and are most tender over;—which afterwards we would give the world to recall: and, though it was done most harmlessly, and in pure ignorance, grieve over and feel as guilty about as if we had committed an actual crime.

I saw I had somehow unawares struck Lady de Bougainville to the very heart. Not that she showed it much; she did not speak—no, I forget, I think she did speak, making some commonplace remark about my familiarity with Scripture; but there came a grey shadow all over her face, the features quivered visibly, she turned away, and suddenly sat down in the broad window-sill, clasping her arms together on her lap, and looking out at the view;—then, beyond the view, up to the rosy floating clouds of the spring sunset, until gradually its beauty seemed to soothe her, and take away her pain.

By and by I ventured to ask, chiefly to break the silence, whether she ever sat in this room. It was a very large room, with six windows, and a good view from each; but its size and ghostliness and the dim figures on the walls would make it rather "eerie" to sit in, especially of evenings.

"Do you think so, child? I do not. I often stay here, quite alone, until bedtime. Would you like to see my bedroom? Perhaps you will think that a more 'eerie' place still."

It certainly was. As large fully as the tapestry-room, out of which you passed into it by a short flight of stairs. It was divided in the centre by pillars, between which hung heavy curtains, which at pleasure could be made completely to hide the bed. And such a bed!—a catafalque rather—raised on a daïs, and ascended by steps. To enter it would have been like going to bed in Westminster Abbey, and waking up in it one would have felt as if one were a dead hero lying in state.

What an awful place! I asked timidly if she really slept in that room, and quite alone?

"Oh yes," she answered. "The servants inhabit a different part of the house. Once when I was ill, this winter, my maid wanted to sleep in a corner there; she is a good girl, and very fond of me, but I would not let her. I prefer being quite alone. Seventy," she added, smiling, "is not so nearly fearful of solitude as sixteen."

"And you are really not afraid, ma'am?"

"What should I be afraid of? my own company, or the company of those ghosts I spoke of? which are very gentle ghosts, and will never come to you, child," and once more she laid her hand upon my head. I think she rather liked my curls; she said they were "pretty curls." "Child, when you are as old as I am, you will have found out that after all we must learn to be content with loneliness. For, more or less, we live alone, and assuredly we shall die alone. Who will go with us on that last, last journey? Which of our dear ones have we been able to go with? We can but take them in our arms to the awful shore, see them slip anchor and sail away—whither?—We know not."

"But," I whispered, "God knows."

Lady de Bougainville started, as if my simple words had cast a sudden light into her mind. "Yes, you are right," she said, "it is good for us always to remember that: we cannot at first, but sometimes we do afterwards. So,"—turning her eyes on that great catafalque of a bed with its massive draperies and nodding plumes—"I lie down every night and rise up every morning, quite content; thinking, with equal content, that I shall some day lie down there, to rise up no more."

I was awed. Not exactly frightened: there was nothing to alarm one in that soft measured voice, talking composedly of things we do not usually talk about, and which to young people seem always so startling—but I was awed. I had never thought much about death; had never come face to face with it. It was still to me the mysterious secret of the universe, rather beautiful than terrible. My imagination played with it, often enough, but my heart had never experienced it,—not like hers.

Finding nothing to say that seemed worth saying, I went round the room; examining the pictures which hung upon its walls. They seemed all portraits, of different sizes and sorts, from crayon sketches and black silhouettes to full-length oil paintings—of young people of different ages, from childhood to manhood and womanhood. They had the interest which attaches to all portraits, bad, good, or indifferent, more than to many grander pictures; and I stood and looked at them, wondering who they were, but not daring to inquire, until she solved my difficulty by saying as we went out of the room:

"These are my children." Not "these *were*," but "these *are*."—Her six dead children.

And their father?

I did not ask about him, and there was certainly no portrait in the room which could possibly have been Sir Edward de Bougainville. Once or twice in showing me the house she had cursorily mentioned his name, "Sir Edward bought this," or "Sir Edward preferred that," but it was always as "Sir Edward," never as "my husband,"—that fond name which many widows always use, as if tenaciously anxious that death itself should not loosen one link of the precious tie.

Lady de Bougainville retired to dress for dinner, and I had to do the same. Hurrying over my toilette, and eager to re-examine the house at every available minute, I came ignorantly into the only room where we had not penetrated—the dining-room—and there saw, lit up by the blazing fire, the only picture there—a large portrait in oils.

"Who is that?" I took courage presently to ask of the man-servant who was laying the table, with glittering plate and delicate glass, more beautiful than any I had ever seen.

"It's Sir Edward, Miss,—my lady's husband."

"Oh, of course," I said, trying to look unconcerned, and speedily quitting the room, for I was a little afraid of that most respectable footman.

But, in truth, I never was more astonished than at this discovery. First, the portrait was in clerical robes; and, though I ought to have known it, I certainly did not know that a "Sir" could be also a "Reverend." Then it was such a common face,—good-looking, perhaps, in so far as abundant whiskers, great eyes, rosy checks, and a large nose constitute handsomeness; but there was nothing in it,—nothing whatever! Neither thought, feeling, nor intellect were likely ever to have existed under those big bones, covered with comfortable flesh and blood. Perhaps this was partly the artist's fault. He must have been a commonplace artist, from the stiff formal attitude in which he had placed his sitter—at a table, with an open book before him and a crimson curtain behind. But Titian himself would have struggled vainly to impart interest to that round forehead, long weak chin, and rabbit mouth, with its good-natured, self-complacent smile.

I contrasted the portrait mentally with the living face of Lady de Bougainville,—her sharply-cut yet mobile features, her firm close lips, her brilliant eyes. Could it be possible that this man was her husband? Had I, with the imaginative faculty of youth, constructed a romance which never existed? Had her life been, to say the least, a great mistake,—at any rate so far as concerned her marriage? How *could* she marry a man like that! I know not whether I most pitied, or—may Heaven forgive me my momentary harsh judgment, given with the rash reaction peculiar to young people—condemned her.

Yes, I was hard; to the living and to the dead likewise. The portrait may not have been like the original: I have seen many a good face so villanously reproduced by an inferior artist, that you would hardly recognise your best friend. But, granting that he was handsome—which from after and circumstantial evidence I am pretty sure of—still, Sir Edward de Bougainville could never have had either a very clever or very pleasant face. Not even in his youth, when the portrait was painted. It was a presentation portrait, in a heavy gilt frame, which bore the motto, "From an admiring Congregation," of some church in Dublin.

Then, had Sir Edward been an Irishman? It was decidedly an Irish face—not of the broad and flat-nosed, but the dark and good-featured type. De Bougainville was not at all an Irish name; but I knew there had been a considerable influx of French families into Ireland after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. How I longed to ask questions! but it was impossible.

At dinner, my hostess sat with her back to the portrait; I, directly opposite to it, and her. The candelabra glimmered between us—how I love the delicate, pure light of wax candles!—glimmered on her softly-tinted old face, set off by the white muslin of her widow's cap, and the rich lace at her throat and on her bosom; upon her shining black silk dress, and her numerous rings. As I have said, her appearance was essentially aristocratic, but she had come to that time of life when only a noble soul will make it so: when the most beautiful woman in the world, if she have only beauty to recommend her, fades into commonplace plainness; and neither birth nor breeding will supply the want of what includes and outshines them both—the lamp burning *inside* the lovely house; and so making it lovely even to its latest moment of decay.

This was exactly what I saw in her, and did not see in Sir Edward de Bougainville. The portrait quite haunted me. I wondered how she could sit underneath it day after day; whether she liked or disliked to look at it, or whether during long years she had grown so used to it that she scarcely saw it at all. And yet as we rose to retire, those big staring eyes of the dead man seemed to follow her out of the room, as if to inquire, "Have you forgotten me?"

Had she? Can a woman, after ever so sad a wedded life, ever so long a widowhood, quite forget the husband of her youth, the father of her children? There are circumstances when she might do so—other circumstances when I almost think she ought. Nevertheless, I doubt if she ever can. This, without any sentimental belief in never-dying love—for love can be killed outright; and when its life has fled, better that its corpse should be buried out of sight: let there be no ridiculous shams kept up, but let a silence complete as that of the grave fall—between even child and parent, husband and wife. Still, as to forgetting? Men may; I cannot tell: but we women *never* forget.

Lady de Bougainville took my arm—a mere kindliness, as she required no support, and was much taller than I—and we went out of the dining-room through the hall, where, in spite of the lamp, the moonlight lay visibly on the scagliola pillars, clear and cold. I could not help shivering. She noticed it, and immediately gave orders that instead of the drawing-room we should go and sit in the cedar parlour.

"It will be warmer and more cheerful for you, Winifred; and, besides, I like my cedar parlour; it reminds me of my friend, Miss Harriett Byron. You have read 'Sir Charles Grandison?'"

I had, and burst into enthusiasm over the "man of men," doubting if there are such men nowadays.

"No, nor ever were," said, with a sharp ring in her voice, Lady de Bougainville.

Then, showing me the wainscotting of cedar-wood, she told me how it also had been discovered, like the tapestry and the oak carvings, when Brierley Hall was put under repair; which had occupied a whole year and more after the house was bought.

"Why did you buy it, if it was so dilapidated?" I asked.

"Because we wanted something old, yet something that would make into a family seat—the root of a numerous race. And we required a large house; there were so many of us then. Now——"

She stopped. Accustomed as she had grown to the past, with much of its pain deadened by the merciful anæsthesia of time and old age, still, talking to me, a stranger, seemed to revive it a little. As she stood by the fire, the light shining on her rings—a heap of emeralds and diamonds, almost concealing the wedding-ring, now a mere thread of gold—I could see how she twisted her fingers together, and clasped and unclasped her hands; physical actions implying sharp mental pain.

But she said nothing, and after we had had our coffee—delicious French *café-au-lait*, served in the most exquisite Sèvres china—she took up a book, and giving me another, we both sat reading quietly, almost without speaking another syllable, until my bedtime.

When I went to bed— early, by her command—she touched my cheeks, French fashion, with her lips. Many will laugh at the confession—but that kiss seemed to thrill me all through with a felicity as deep and intense as that of a young knight who, having won his spurs, receives for the first time the benediction and salutation of his beloved.

When I entered my room, it was bright with firelight and the glow of scarlet curtains. I revelled in its novel luxuries as if I had been accustomed to them all my days. They gratified my taste, my imagination, my senses—shall I say my soul? Yes, a part of one's soul does take pleasure, and has a right to take pleasure, in material comfort and beauty. I had greatly enjoyed wandering over that handsome house, dining at the well-appointed table, spending the evening in the pretty cedar parlour. Now, when I retired into my own chamber, into the innermost chamber of my own heart, how fared it with me?

Let me tell the truth. I sat awhile, wrapped in purely sensuous satisfaction.

Then I thought of my poor father, sitting in his cold study; having none of these luxuries, nor caring for them. An ugly house to him was the same as a pretty one: a blank street-wall as a lovely view. Pleasant things were altogether wasted upon him; nay, he despised them, and would have despised me, I knew, had he seen in me any tendency—alas! an hereditary tendency—to luxury and selfish extravagance. Yet I had it, or I feared so sometimes; but perhaps the very fear enabled me to keep it under wholesome control. It sometimes is so. The most strictly truthful person I ever knew, said to me once, "I believe I was born a liar, till I found out that lying ran in our blood, and that cured me."

My cure came in a different way, but not immediately. I well recall the bitterness with which, this night, I sat comparing my bedroom in Brierley Hall with the wretched attic which I tried so hard to make tolerably pretty, and could not. Was I destined always to live thus—struggling vainly against natural tastes, which Providence did not choose to gratify? Were they therefore wrong? Was it any blame to Lady de Bougainville that in spite of her saying, if I were as rich as she, "she should be very sorry for me," she should be at this minute ascending her beautiful staircase to her stately bedroom—I heard her shut its door—and laying down her lovely hair upon those laced pillows, as she must have done all her life? She had doubtless been born to all these pleasant necessaries; I, if I wanted them, must earn them. Were they wrong in themselves, or only wrong when attained at the sacrifice of higher and better things? Does a blessing, which, freely bestowed by Heaven, may be as freely and righteously enjoyed, become a sin when, being denied, it is so madly craved after as to corrupt our whole nature?

I was sitting thus, trying to solve in my foolish childish mind all the puzzles of the universe, with the gaunt, grim, reproachful face of John the Baptist looking down on me from overhead, when a slight knock came to my door—three little knocks indeed. My nerves had been wound up to such a pitch of excitement that I forgot the simple solution of the mystery—that Lady de Bougainville's room had only a small antechamber between it and mine; and when the door opened, and a tall figure in a dressing-gown of grey flannel, not unlike a monk or a nun, stood there, I screamed with superstitious terror.

"Foolish child!" was all she said, and explained that she had seen the light shining under my door, and that girls of sixteen ought to have their "beauty-sleep" for a full hour before midnight. And then she asked me what I was doing?

"Nothing, only thinking."

"What were you thinking about?"

From the very first, when she put any question in that way, I never thought of answering by the slightest prevarication—nothing but the direct, entire truth. Nobody could, to her.

"I was thinking about earning a fortune; such a fortune as yours."

She started, as if some one had touched her with a cold dead hand. "What do you know of my fortune or of me?"

"Nothing," I eagerly answered, only adding that I wished I was as rich as she was, or could in any way get riches—with many other extravagant expressions; for I had worked myself up into a most excited state, and hardly knew what I was saying.

Lady de Bougainville must have seen this, for, instead of sending me at once to bed, she sat down beside me, and took my hand.

"And so you would like to earn a fortune, as I earned mine, and to enjoy it, as I enjoyed mine? Poor child!" She sat thoughtful a little, then suddenly said: "I do not like even a child to deceive herself. Shall I tell you a story?"

I expected it would have been the story of her life; but no, it was only a little fable of a shepherd who, elevated from his sheepfolds to be vizier to a caliph, was accused of appropriating his master's treasures, and hiding them in a wooden box which he always kept beside him.

At last, spurred on by the vizier's enemies, the caliph insisted on seeing the contents of the box, and came with all his courtiers to witness its opening. It contained only a ragged woollen coat, shepherd's sandals, and a crook.

"Now, Winifred, would you like to play the caliph and the envious courtiers? Will you come and look at my hidden treasure?"

She led the way into her bedroom, where the firelight shone on masses of damask drapery, and mirrors which at each step reproduced our figures. How noble and stately hers was, even in the grey dressing-gown! At the foot of the bed, quite hidden by a velvet cushion which covered it, lay one of those old-fashioned hair-trunks which were in use about half a century ago. She unlocked it, and therein was—what think you?

A gown of white dimity, or what had been white, but was now yellow with lying by, three little girls' frocks of commonest lilac print, two pairs of boys' shoes very much worn, and, patched all over with the utmost neatness, a pair of threadbare boy's trousers.

This was all. I looked into the box, as I might have looked into a coffin, but I said not a word: her face warned me I had better not. Silently she locked up the trunk again; then, with a tender carefulness, as if she were wrapping up a baby, laid the cushions over it, and, taking my hand, led me back to my room.

"Now go to bed and to sleep, Winifred; but cease dreaming about a fortune, and envy me mine no more."

To be continued.