

## XXXVII.

BASIL RANSOM spent nearly a month at Marmion; in announcing this fact I am very conscious of its extraordinary character. Poor Olive may well have been thrown back into her alarms by his presenting himself there; for after her return from New York she took to her soul the conviction that she had really done with him. Not only did the impulse of revulsion under which Verena had demanded that their departure from Tenth Street should be immediate appear to her a proof that it had been sufficient for her young friend to touch Mr. Ransom's moral texture with her finger, as it were, in order to draw back for ever; but what she had learned from her companion of his own manifestations, his apparent disposition to throw up the game, added to her feeling of security. He had spoken to Verena of their little excursion as his last opportunity, let her know that he regarded it not as the beginning of a more intimate acquaintance but as the end even of such relations as already existed between them. He gave her up, for reasons best known to himself; if he wanted to frighten Olive he judged that he had frightened her enough: his Southern chivalry suggested to him perhaps that he ought to let her off before he had worried her to death. Doubtless, too, he had perceived how vain it was to hope to make Verena abjure a faith so solidly founded; and though he admired her enough to wish to possess her on his own terms, he shrank from the mortification which the future would have in keeping for him—that of finding that, after six months of courting and in spite of all her sympathy, her desire to do what people expected of her, she despised his opinions as much as the first day. Olive Chancellor

was able to a certain extent to believe what she wished to believe, and that was one reason why she had twisted Verena's flight from New York, just after she let her friend see how much she should like to drink deeper of the cup, into a warrant for living in a fool's paradise. If she had been less afraid, she would have read things more clearly; she would have seen that we don't run away from people unless we fear them and that we don't fear them unless we know that we are unarmed. Verena feared Basil Ransom now (though this time she declined to run); but now she had taken up her weapons, she had told Olive she was exposed, she had asked *her* to be her defence. Poor Olive was stricken as she had never been before, but the extremity of her danger gave her a desperate energy. The only comfort in her situation was that this time Verena had confessed her peril, had thrown herself into her hands. 'I like him—I can't help it—I do like him. I don't want to marry him, I don't want to embrace his ideas, which are unspeakably false and horrible; but I like him better than any gentleman I have seen.' So much as this the girl announced to her friend as soon as the conversation of which I have just given a sketch was resumed, as it was very soon, you may be sure, and very often, in the course of the next few days. That was her way of saying that a great crisis had arrived in her life, and the statement needed very little amplification to stand as a shy avowal that she too had succumbed to the universal passion. Olive had had her suspicions, her terrors, before; but she perceived now how idle and foolish they had been, and that this was a different affair from any of the 'phases' of which she had hitherto anxiously watched the development. As I say, she felt it to be a considerable mercy that Verena's attitude was frank, for it gave her something to take hold of; she could no longer be put off with sophistries about receiving visits from handsome and unscrupulous young men for the sake of the opportunities it gave one to convert them. She took hold, accordingly, with passion, with fury; after the shock of Ransom's arrival had passed away she determined that he should not find her chilled into dumb submission. Verena had told her that she wanted her to hold her tight,

to rescue her; and there was no fear that, for an instant, she should sleep at her post.

'I like him—I like him; but I want to hate——'

'You want to hate him!' Olive broke in.

'No, I want to hate my liking. I want you to keep before me all the reasons why I should—many of them so fearfully important. Don't let me lose sight of anything! Don't be afraid I shall not be grateful when you remind me.'

That was one of the singular speeches that Verena made in the course of their constant discussion of the terrible question, and it must be confessed that she made a great many. The strangest of all was when she protested, as she did again and again to Olive, against the idea of their seeking safety in retreat. She said there was a want of dignity in it—that she had been ashamed, afterwards, of what she had done in rushing away from New York. This care for her moral appearance was, on Verena's part, something new; inasmuch as, though she had struck that note on previous occasions—had insisted on its being her duty to face the accidents and alarms of life—she had never erected such a standard in the face of a disaster so sharply possible. It was not her habit either to talk or to think about her dignity, and when Olive found her taking that tone she felt more than ever that the dreadful, ominous, fatal part of the situation was simply that now, for the first time in all the history of their sacred friendship, Verena was not sincere. She was not sincere when she told her that she wanted to be helped against Mr. Ransom—when she exhorted her, that way, to keep everything that was salutary and fortifying before her eyes. Olive did not go so far as to believe that she was playing a part and putting her off with words which, glossing over her treachery, only made it more cruel; she would have admitted that that treachery was as yet unwitting, that Verena deceived herself first of all, thinking she really wished to be saved. Her phrases about her dignity were insincere, as well as her pretext that they must stay to look after Miss Birdseye: as if Doctor Prance were not abundantly able to discharge that function and would not be enchanted to get them out

of the house! Olive had perfectly divined by this time that Doctor Prance had no sympathy with their movement, no general ideas; that she was simply shut up to petty questions of physiological science and of her own professional activity. She would never have invited her down if she had realised this in advance so much as the doctor's dry detachment from all their discussions, their readings and practisings, her constant expeditions to fish and botanise, subsequently enabled her to do. She was very narrow, but it did seem as if she knew more about Miss Birdseye's peculiar physical conditions—they were *very* peculiar—than any one else, and this was a comfort at a time when that admirable woman seemed to be suffering a loss of vitality.

'The great point is that it must be met some time, and it will be a tremendous relief to have it over. He is determined to have it out with me, and if the battle doesn't come off to-day we shall have to fight it to-morrow. I don't see why this isn't as good a time as any other. My lecture for the Music Hall is as good as finished, and I haven't got anything else to do; so I can give all my attention to our personal struggle. It requires a good deal, you would admit, if you knew how wonderfully he can talk. If we should leave this place to-morrow he would come after us to the very next one. He would follow us everywhere. A little while ago we could have escaped him, because he says that then he had no money. He hasn't got much now, but he has got enough to pay his way. He is so encouraged by the reception of his article by the editor of the "Rational Review," that he is sure that in future his pen will be a resource.'

These remarks were uttered by Verena after Basil Ransom had been three days at Marmion, and when she reached this point her companion interrupted her with the inquiry, 'Is that what he proposes to support you with—his pen?'

'Oh yes; of course he admits we should be terribly poor.'

'And this vision of a literary career is based entirely upon an article that hasn't yet seen the light? I don't see

how a man of any refinement can approach a woman with so beggarly an account of his position in life.'

'He says he wouldn't—he would have been ashamed—three months ago; that was why, when we were in New York, and he felt, even then—well (so he says) all he feels now, he made up his mind not to persist, to let me go. But just lately a change has taken place; his state of mind altered completely, in the course of a week, in consequence of the letter that editor wrote him about his contribution, and his paying for it right off. It was a remarkably flattering letter. He says he believes in his future now; he has before him a vision of distinction, of influence, and of fortune, not great, perhaps, but sufficient to make life tolerable. He doesn't think life is very delightful, in the nature of things; but one of the best things a man can do with it is to get hold of some woman (of course, she must please him very much, to make it worth while), whom he may draw close to him.'

'And couldn't he get hold of any one but you—among all the exposed millions of our sex?' poor Olive groaned. 'Why must he pick you out, when everything he knew about you showed you to be, exactly, the very last?'

'That's just what I have asked him, and he only remarks that there is no reasoning about such things. He fell in love with me that first evening, at Miss Birdseye's. So you see there was some ground for that mystic apprehension of yours. It seems as if I pleased him more than any one.'

Olive flung herself over on the couch, burying her face in the cushions, which she tumbled in her despair, and moaning out that he didn't love Verena, he never had loved her, it was only his hatred of their cause that made him pretend it; he wanted to do that an injury, to do it the worst he could think of. He didn't love her, he hated her, he only wanted to smother her, to crush her, to kill her—as she would infallibly see that he would if she listened to him. It was because he knew that her voice had magic in it, and from the moment he caught its first note he had determined to destroy it. It was not tenderness that moved him—it was devilish malignity; tenderness would be incapable of requiring the horrible sacrifice that

he was not ashamed to ask, of requiring her to commit perjury and blasphemy, to desert a work, an interest, with which her very heart-strings were interlaced, to give the lie to her whole young past, to her purest, holiest ambitions. Olive put forward no claim of her own, breathed, at first, at least, not a word of remonstrance in the name of her personal loss, of their blighted union; she only dwelt upon the unspeakable tragedy of a defection from their standard, of a failure on Verena's part to carry out what she had undertaken, of the horror of seeing her bright career blotted out with darkness and tears, of the joy and elation that would fill the breast of all their adversaries at this illustrious, consummate proof of the fickleness, the futility, the predestined servility, of women. A man had only to whistle for her, and she who had pretended most was delighted to come and kneel at his feet. Olive's most passionate protest was summed up in her saying that if Verena were to forsake them it would put back the emancipation of women a hundred years. She did not, during these dreadful days, talk continuously; she had long periods of pale, intensely anxious, watchful silence, interrupted by outbreaks of passionate argument, entreaty, invocation. It was Verena who talked incessantly, Verena who was in a state entirely new to her, and, as any one could see, in an attitude entirely unnatural and overdone. If she was deceiving herself, as Olive said, there was something very affecting in her effort, her ingenuity. If she tried to appear to Olive impartial, coldly judicious, in her attitude with regard to Basil Ransom, and only anxious to see, for the moral satisfaction of the thing, how good a case, as a lover, he might make out for himself and how much he might touch her susceptibilities, she endeavoured, still more earnestly, to practise this fraud upon her own imagination. She abounded in every proof that she should be in despair if she should be overborne, and she thought of arguments even more convincing, if possible, than Olive's, why she should hold on to her old faith, why she should resist even at the cost of acute temporary suffering. She was voluble, fluent, feverish; she was perpetually bringing up the subject, as if to encourage her friend, to show how she

kept possession of her judgment, how independent she remained.

No stranger situation can be imagined than that of these extraordinary young women at this juncture; it was so singular on Verena's part, in particular, that I despair of presenting it to the reader with the air of reality. To understand it, one must bear in mind her peculiar frankness, natural and acquired, her habit of discussing questions, sentiments, moralities, her education, in the atmosphere of lecture-rooms, of *séances*, her familiarity with the vocabulary of emotion, the mysteries of 'the spiritual life.' She had learned to breathe and move in a rarefied air, as she would have learned to speak Chinese if her success in life had depended upon it; but this dazzling trick, and all her artlessly artful facilities, were not a part of her essence, an expression of her innermost preferences. What *was* a part of her essence was the extraordinary generosity with which she could expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her. Olive, as we know, had made the reflection that no one was naturally less preoccupied with the idea of her dignity, and though Verena put it forward as an excuse for remaining where they were, it must be admitted that in reality she was very deficient in the desire to be consistent with herself. Olive had contributed with all her zeal to the development of Verena's gift; but I scarcely venture to think now, what she may have said to herself, in the secrecy of deep meditation, about the consequences of cultivating an abundant eloquence. Did she say that Verena was attempting to smother her now in her own phrases? did she view with dismay the fatal effect of trying to have an answer for everything? From Olive's condition during these lamentable weeks there is a certain propriety—a delicacy enjoined by the respect for misfortune—in averting our head. She neither ate nor slept; she could scarcely speak without bursting into tears; she felt so implacably, insidiously baffled. She remembered the magnanimity with which she had declined (the winter before the last) to receive the vow of eternal maidenhood which she had at first demanded and then put by as too crude a test, but which Verena, for

a precious hour, for ever flown, would *then* have been willing to take. She repented of it with bitterness and rage; and then she asked herself, more desperately still, whether even if she held that pledge she should be brave enough to enforce it in the face of actual complications. She believed that if it were in her power to say, 'No, I won't let you off; I have your solemn word, and I won't!' Verena would bow to that decree and remain with her; but the magic would have passed out of her spirit for ever, the sweetness out of their friendship, the efficacy out of their work. She said to her again and again that she had utterly changed since that hour she came to her, in New York, after her morning with Mr. Ransom, and sobbed out that they must hurry away. Then she had been wounded, outraged, sickened, and in the interval nothing had happened, nothing but that one exchange of letters, which she knew about, to bring her round to a shameless tolerance. Shameless Verena admitted it to be; she assented over and over to this proposition, and explained, as eagerly each time as if it were the first, what it was that had come to pass, what it was that had brought her round. It had simply come over her that she liked him, that this was the true point of view, the only one from which one could consider the situation in a way that would lead to what she called a *real* solution—a permanent rest. On this particular point Verena never responded, in the liberal way I have mentioned, without asseverating at the same time that what she desired most in the world was to prove (the picture Olive had held up from the first), that a woman *could* live on persistently, clinging to a great, vivifying, redemptory idea, without the help of a man. To testify to the end against the stale superstition—mother of every misery—that those gentry were as indispensable as they had proclaimed themselves on the house-tops—that, she passionately protested, was as inspiring a thought in the present poignant crisis as it had ever been.

The one grain of comfort that Olive extracted from the terrors that pressed upon her was that now she knew the worst; she knew it since Verena had told her, after so long and so ominous a reticence, of the detestable episode at

Cambridge. That seemed to her the worst, because it had been thunder in a clear sky; the incident had sprung from a quarter from which, months before, all symptoms appeared to have vanished. Though Verena had now done all she could to make up for her perfidious silence by repeating everything that passed between them as she sat with Mr. Ransom in Monadnoc Place or strolled with him through the colleges, it imposed itself upon Olive that that occasion was the key of all that had happened since, that he had then obtained an irremediable hold upon her. If Verena had spoken at the time, she would never have let her go to New York; the sole compensation for that hideous mistake was that the girl, recognising it to the full, evidently deemed now that she couldn't be communicative enough. There were certain afternoons in August, long, beautiful and terrible, when one felt that the summer was rounding its curve, and the rustle of the full-leaved trees in the slanting golden light, in the breeze that ought to be delicious, seemed the voice of the coming autumn, of the warnings and dangers of life—portentous, insufferable hours when, as she sat under the softly swaying vine-leaves of the trellis with Miss Birdseye and tried, in order to still her nerves, to read something aloud to her guest, the sound of her own quavering voice made her think more of that baleful day at Cambridge than even of the fact that at that very moment Verena was 'off' with Mr. Ransom—had gone to take the little daily walk with him to which it had been arranged that their enjoyment of each other's society should be reduced. Arranged, I say; but that is not exactly the word to describe the compromise arrived at by a kind of tacit exchange of tearful entreaty and tightened grasp, after Ransom had made it definite to Verena that he was indeed going to stay a month and she had promised that she would not resort to base evasions, to flight (which would avail her nothing, he notified her), but would give him a chance, would listen to him a few minutes every day. He had insisted that the few minutes should be an hour, and the way to spend it was obvious. They wandered along the waterside to a rocky, shrub-covered point, which made a walk of just the right duration. Here all the homely

languor of the region, the mild, fragrant Cape-quality, the sweetness of white sands, quiet waters, low promontories where there were paths among the barberries and tidal pools gleamed in the sunset—here all the spirit of a ripe summer-afternoon seemed to hang in the air. There were wood-walks too; they sometimes followed bosky uplands, where accident had grouped the trees with odd effects of 'style,' and where in grassy intervals and fragrant nooks of rest they came out upon sudden patches of Arcady. In such places Verena listened to her companion with her watch in her hand, and she wondered, very sincerely, how she could care for a girl who made the conditions of courtship so odious. He had recognised, of course, at the very first, that he could not inflict himself again upon Miss Chancellor, and after that awkward morning-call I have described he did not again, for the first three weeks of his stay at Marmion, penetrate into the cottage whose back windows overlooked the deserted ship-yard. Olive, as may be imagined, made, on this occasion, no protest for the sake of being ladylike or of preventing him from putting her apparently in the wrong. The situation between them was too grim; it was war to the knife, it was a question of which should pull hardest. So Verena took a tryst with the young man as if she had been a maid-servant and Basil Ransom a 'follower.' They met a little way from the house; beyond it, outside the village.