CHAPTER IX.

IT is not the purpose of this narrative to dwell minutely upon the events of the next few months. Truth to say, they were devoid of incidents of sufficient moment in themselves to warrant chronicle. What they led up to was memorable enough.

As time went on John found himself on terms of growing intimacy with the Carling household, and eventually it came about that if there passed a day when their door did not open to him it was *dies non.*

Mr. Carling was ostensibly more responsible than the ladies for the frequency of our friend's visits, and grew to look forward to them. In fact, he seemed to regard them as paid primarily to himself, and ignored an occasional suggestion on his wife's part that it might not be wholly the pleasure of a chat and a game at cards with him that brought the young man so often to the house. And when once she ventured to concern him with some stirrings of her mind on the subject, he rather testily (for him) pooh-poohed her misgivings, remarking that Mary was her own mistress, and, so far as he had ever seen, remarkably well qualified to regulate her own affairs. Had she ever seen anything to lead her to suppose that there was any particular sentiment existing between Lenox and her sister?

"No," said Mrs. Carling, "perhaps not exactly, but you know how those things go, and he always stays after we come up when she is at home." To which her husband vouchsafed no reply, but began a protracted wavering as to the advisability of leaving the steam on or turning it off for the night, which was a cold one—a dilemma which, involving his personal welfare or comfort at the moment, permitted no consideration of other matters to share his mind.

Mrs. Carling had not spoken to her sister upon the subject. She thought that that young woman, if she were not, as Mr. Carling said, "remarkably well qualified to regulate her own affairs," at least held the opinion that she was, very strongly.

The two were devotedly fond of each other, but Mrs. Carling was the elder by twenty years, and in her love was an element of maternal solicitude to which her sister, while giving love for love in fullest measure, did not fully respond. The elder would have liked to share every thought, but she was neither so strong nor so clever as the girl to whom she had been almost as a mother, and who, though perfectly truthful and frank when she was minded to express herself, gave, as a rule, little satisfaction to attempts to explore her mind, and on some subjects was capable of meeting such attempts with impatience, not to say resentment—a fact of which her sister was quite aware. But as time went on, and the frequency of John's visits and attentions grew into a settled habit, Mrs. Carling's uneasiness, with which perhaps was mingled a bit of curiosity, got the better of her reserve, and she

determined to get what satisfaction could be obtained for it.

They were sitting in Mrs. Carling's room, which was over the drawing-room in the front of the house. A fire of cannel blazed in the grate.

A furious storm was whirling outside. Mrs. Carling was occupied with some sort of needlework, and her sister, with a writing pad on her lap, was composing a letter to a friend with whom she carried on a desultory and rather one-sided correspondence. Presently she yawned slightly, and, putting down her pad, went over to the window and looked out.

"What a day!" she exclaimed. "It seems to get worse and worse. Positively you can't see across the street. It's like a western blizzard."

"It is, really," said Mrs. Carling; and then, moved by the current of thought which had been passing in her mind of late, "I fancy we shall spend the evening by ourselves to-night."

"That would not be so unusual as to be extraordinary, would it?" said Mary.

"Wouldn't it?" suggested Mrs. Carling in a tone that was meant to be slightly quizzical.

"We are by ourselves most evenings, are we not?" responded her sister, without turning around. "Why do you particularize to-night?"

"I was thinking," answered Mrs. Carling, bending a little closer over her work, "that even Mr. Lenox would hardly venture out in such a storm unless it were absolutely necessary."

"Oh, yes, to be sure, Mr. Lenox; very likely not," was Miss Blake's comment, in a tone of indifferent recollection.

"He comes here very often, almost every night, in fact," remarked Mrs. Carling, looking up sideways at her sister's back.

"Now that you mention it," said Mary dryly, "I have noticed something of the sort myself."

"Do you think he ought to?" asked her sister, after a moment of silence.

"Why not?" said the girl, turning to her questioner for the first time. "And why should I think he should or should not? Doesn't he come to see Julius, and on Julius's invitation? I have never asked him—but once," she said, flushing a little as she recalled the occasion and the wording of the invitation.

"Do you think," returned Mrs. Carling, "that his visits are wholly on Julius's account, and that he would come so often if there were no other inducement? You know," she continued, pressing her point timidly but persistently, "he always stays after we go upstairs if you are at home, and I have noticed that when you are out he always goes before our time for retiring."

"I should say," was the rejoinder, "that that was very much the proper thing. Whether or not he comes here too often is not for me to say—I have no opinion on the subject. But, to do him justice, he is about the last man to wait for a tacit dismissal, or to cause you and Julius to depart from what he knows to be your regular habit out of politeness to him. He is a person of too much delicacy and good breeding to stay when—if—that is to say——" She turned again to the window without completing her sentence, and, though Mrs. Carling thought she could complete it for her, she wisely forbore. After a moment of silence, Mary said in a voice devoid of any traces of confusion:

"You asked me if I thought Mr. Lenox would come so often if there were no object in his coming except to see Julius. I can only say that if Julius were out of the question I think he would come here but seldom; but," she added, as she left the window and resumed her seat, "I do not quite see the object of this discussion, and, indeed, I am not quite sure of what we are discussing. Do you object," she asked, looking curiously at her sister and smiling slightly, "to Mr. Lenox's coming here as he does, and if so, why?" This was apparently more direct than Mrs. Carling was quite prepared for. "And if you do," Mary proceeded, "what is to be done about it? Am I to make him understand that it is not considered the proper thing? or will you? or shall we leave it to Julius?"

Mrs. Carling looked up into her sister's face, in which was a smile of amused penetration, and looked down again in visible embarrassment.

The young woman laughed as she shook her finger at her.

"Oh, you transparent goose!" she cried. "What did he say?"

"What did who say?" was the evasive response.

"Julius," said Mary, putting her finger under her sister's chin and raising her face. "Tell me now. You've been talking with him, and I insist upon knowing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So there!"

"Well," she admitted hesitatingly, "I said to him something like what I have to you, that it seemed to me that Mr. Lenox came very often, and that I did not believe it was all on his account, and that he" (won't somebody please invent another pronoun?) "always stayed when you were at home——"

"——and," broke in her sister, "that you were afraid my young affections were being engaged, and that, after all, we didn't know much if anything about the young man, or, perhaps, that he was forming a hopeless attachment, and so on."

"No," said Mrs. Carling, "I didn't say that exactly. I——"

"Didn't you, really?" said Mary teasingly. "One ought to be explicit in such cases, don't you think? Well, what did Julius say? Was he very much concerned?" Mrs. Carling's face colored faintly under her sister's raillery, and she gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"Come, now," said the girl relentlessly, "what did he say?"

"Well," answered Mrs. Carling, "I must admit that he said 'Pooh!' for one thing, and that you were your own mistress, and, so far as he had seen, you were very well qualified to manage your own affairs."

Her sister clapped her hands. "Such discrimination have I not seen," she exclaimed, "no, not in Israel! What else did he say?" she demanded, with a dramatic gesture. "Let us know the worst."

Mrs. Carling laughed a little. "I don't remember," she admitted, "that he said anything more on the subject. He got into some perplexity about whether the steam should be off or on, and after that question was settled we went to bed." Mary laughed outright.

"So Julius doesn't think I need watching," she said.

"Mary," protested her sister in a hurt tone,

" you don't think I ever did or could watch you? I don't want to pry into your secrets, dear," and she looked up with tears in her eyes. The girl dropped on her knees beside her sister and put her arms about her neck.

" You precious old lamb! " she cried, " I know you don't. You couldn't pry into anybody's secrets if you tried. You couldn't even try. But I haven't any, dear, and I'll tell you every one of them, and, rather than see a tear in your dear eyes, I would tell John Lenox that I never wanted to see him again; and I don't know what you have been thinking, but I haven't thought so at all " (which last assertion made even Mrs. Carling laugh), " and I know that I have been teasing and horrid, and if you won't put me in the closet I will be good and answer every question like a nice little girl." Whereupon she gave her sister a kiss and resumed her seat with an air of abject penitence which lasted for a minute. Then she laughed again, though there was a watery gleam in her own eyes. Mrs. Carling gave her a look of great love and admiration.

" I ought not to have brought up the subject," she said, " knowing as I do how you feel about such discussions, but I love you so much that sometimes I can't help——"

" Alice," exclaimed the girl, " please have the kindness to call me a selfish P—I—G. It will relieve my feelings."

" But I do not think you are," said Mrs. Carling literally.

" But I am at times," declared Mary, " and you deserve not only to have, but to be shown, all the love and confidence that I can give you. It's only this, that sometimes your solicitude makes

you imagine things that do not exist, and you think I am withholding my confidence; and then, again, I am enough like other people that I don't always know exactly what I do think. Now, about this matter——"

" Don't say a word about it, dear," her sister interrupted, " unless you would rather than not."

" I wish to," said Mary. " Of course I am not oblivious of the fact that Mr. Lenox comes here very often, nor that he seems to like to stay and talk with me, because, don't you know, if he didn't he could go when you do, and I don't mind admitting that, as a general thing, I like to have him stay; but, as I said to you, if it weren't for Julius he would not come here very often."

" Don't you think," said Mrs. Carling, now on an assured footing, " that if it were not for you he would not come so often? "

Perhaps Mary overestimated the attraction which her brother-in-law had for Mr. Lenox, and she smiled slightly as she thought that it was quite possible. " I suppose," she went on, with a little shrug of the shoulders, " that the proceeding is not strictly conventional, and that the absolutely correct thing would be for him to say good night when you and Julius do, and that there are those who would regard my permitting a young man in no way related to me to see me very often in the evening without the protection of a duenna as a very unbecoming thing.".

" I never have had such a thought about it," declared Mrs. Carling.

" I never for a moment supposed you had, dear," said Mary, " nor have I. We are rather unconventional people, making very few claims

upon society, and upon whom 'society' makes very few."

"I am rather sorry for that on your account," said her sister.

"You needn't be," was the rejoinder. "I have no yearnings in that direction which are not satisfied with what I have." She sat for a minute or two with her hands clasped upon her knee, gazing reflectively into the fire, which, in the growing darkness of the winter afternoon, afforded almost the only light in the room. Presently she became conscious that her sister was regarding her with an air of expectation, and resumed: "Leaving the question of the conventions out of the discussion as settled," she said, "there is nothing, Alice, that you need have any concern about, either on Mr. Lenox's account or mine."

"You like him, don't you?" asked Mrs. Carling.

"Yes," said Mary frankly, "I like him very much. We have enough in common to be rather sympathetic, and we differ enough not to be dull, and so we get on very well. I never had a brother," she continued, after a momentary pause, "but I feel toward him as I fancy I should feel toward a brother of about my own age, though he is five or six years older than I am."

"You don't think, then," said Mrs. Carling timidly, "that you are getting to care for him at all?"

"In the sense that you use the word," was the reply, "not the least in the world. If there were to come a time when I really believed I should never see him again, I should be sorry; but if at any time it were a question of six months or

a year, I do not think my equanimity would be particularly disturbed."

"And how about him?" suggested Mrs. Carling. There was no reply.

"Don't you think he may care for you, or be getting to?"

Mary frowned slightly, half closing her eyes and stirring a little uneasily in her chair.

"He hasn't said anything to me on the subject," she replied evasively.

"Would that be necessary?" asked her sister.

"Perhaps not," was the reply, "if the fact were very obvious."

"Isn't it?" persisted Mrs. Carling, with unusual tenacity.

"Well," said the girl, "to be quite frank with you, I have thought once or twice that he entertained some such idea—that is—no, I don't mean to put it just that way. I mean that once or twice something has occurred to give me that idea. That isn't very coherent, is it? But even if it be so," she went on after a moment, with a wave of her hands, "what of it? What does it signify? And if it does signify, what can I do about it?"

"You have thought about it, then?" said her sister.

"As much as I have told you," she answered. "I am not a very sentimental person, I think, and not very much on the lookout for such things, but I know there is such a thing as a man's taking a fancy to a young woman under circumstances which bring them often together, and I have been led to believe that it isn't necessarily fatal to the man even if nothing comes of

it. But be that as it may," she said with a shrug of her shoulders, "what can I do about it? I can't say to Mr. Lenox, 'I think you ought not to come here so much,' unless I give a reason for it, and I think we have come to the conclusion that there is no reason except the danger—to put it in so many words—of his falling in love with me. I couldn't quite say that to him, could I?"

"No, I suppose not," acquiesced Mrs. Carling faintly.

"No, I should say not," remarked the girl. "If he were to say anything to me in the way of—declaration is the word, isn't it?—it would be another matter. But there is no danger of that."

"Why not, if he is fond of you?" asked her sister.

"Because," said Mary, with an emphatic nod, "I won't let him," which assertion was rather weakened by her adding, "and he wouldn't, if I would."

"I don't understand," said her sister.

"Well," said Mary, "I don't pretend to know all that goes on in his mind; but allowing, or rather conjecturing, that he does care for me in the way you mean, I haven't the least fear of his telling me so, and one of the reasons is this, that he is wholly dependent upon his father, with no other prospect for years to come."

"I had the idea somehow," said Mrs. Carling, "that his father was very well-to-do. The young man gives one the impression of a person who has always had everything that he wanted."

"I think that is so," said Mary, "but he told me one day, coming over on the steamer, that he knew nothing whatever of his own prospects

or his father's affairs. I don't remember—at least, it doesn't matter—how he came to say as much, but he did, and afterward gave me a whimsical catalogue of his acquirements and accomplishments, remarking, I remember, that 'there was not a dollar in the whole list'; and lately, though you must not fancy that he discusses his own affairs with me, he has now and then said something to make me guess that he was somewhat troubled about them."

"Is he doing anything?" asked Mrs. Carling.

"He told me the first evening he called here," said Mary, "that he was studying law, at his father's suggestion; but I don't remember the name of the firm in whose office he is."

"Why doesn't he ask his father about his prospects?" said Mrs. Carling.

Mary laughed. "You seem to be so much more interested in the matter than I am," she said, "why don't you ask him yourself?" To which unjustifiable rejoinder her sister made no reply.

"I don't see why he shouldn't," she remarked.

"I think I understand," said Mary. "I fancy from what he has told me that his father is a singularly reticent man, but one in whom his son has always had the most implicit confidence. I imagine, too, that until recently, at any rate, he has taken it for granted that his father was wealthy. He has not confided any misgivings to me, but if he has any he is just the sort of person not to ask, and certainly not to press a question with his father."

"It would seem like carrying delicacy almost too far," remarked Mrs. Carling.

"Perhaps it would," said her sister, "but I think I can understand and sympathize with it."

Mrs. Carling broke the silence which followed for a moment or two as if she were thinking aloud. "You have plenty of money," she said, and colored at her inadvertence. Her sister looked at her for an instant with a humorous smile, and then, as she rose and touched the bell button, said, "That's another reason."

CHAPTER X.

I THINK it should hardly be imputed to John as a fault or a shortcoming that he did not for a long time realize his father's failing powers. True, as has been stated, he had noted some changes in appearance on his return, but they were not great enough to be startling, and, though he thought at times that his father's manner was more subdued than he had ever known it to be, nothing really occurred to arouse his suspicion or anxiety. After a few days the two men appeared to drop into their accustomed relation and routine, meeting in the morning and at dinner; but as John picked up the threads of his acquaintance he usually went out after dinner, and even when he did not his father went early to his own apartment.

From John's childhood he had been much of the time away from home, and there had never, partly from that circumstance and partly from the older man's natural and habitual reserve, been very much intimacy between them. The father did not give his own confidence, and, while always kind and sympathetic when appealed to, did not ask his son's; and, loving his father well and loyally, and trusting him implicitly, it did not occur to John to feel that there was anything wanting in the relation. It was as