"It is only a badge of my trade, Mr. Chattaway."

Whether Mr. Chattaway detected the bitterness of the words—not the bitterness of sarcasm, but of despair—cannot be told. He laughed pleasantly, and before the laugh was over, Mr. Wall came in. Mr. Chattaway removed his hat now, and laid it with his riding-whip beside the indentures.

"I am later than I ought to be," observed Mr. Chattaway, as they shook hands. "The fact is, I was on the point of starting, when my manager at the colliery came up. His business was important, and it kept me the best part of an hour."

"Plenty of time; plenty of time," said Mr. Wall. "Take a seat."

They sat down near the table. George, apparently unnoticed, remained standing on the hearthrug. A few minutes were spent conversing on different subjects, and then Mr. Chattaway turned to the parchment.

"These are the indentures, I presume?"

"Yes."

"I called on Mrs. Ryle last evening. She requested me to say that should her signature be required, as the boy's nearest relative and guardian—as his only parent, it may be said, in fact—she should be ready to affix it at any given time."

"It will not be required," replied Mr. Wall, in a clear voice. "I shall not take George Ryle as an apprentice."

A stolid look of surprise struggled to Mr. Chattaway's leaden face. At first, he scarcely seemed to take in the full meaning of the words. "Not take him?" he rejoined, staring helplessly.

"No. It is a pity these were made out," continued Mr. Wall, taking the indentures in his hand. "It has been so much time and parchment wasted. However, that is not of great consequence. I will be at the loss, as the refusal comes from my side."

Mr. Chattaway found his tongue—found it volubly. "Won't he do? Is he not suitable? I—I don't understand this."

"Not at all suitable, in my opinion," answered Mr. Wall.

Mr. Chattaway turned sharply upon George, a strangely evil look in his dull grey eye, an ominous curl in his thin, dry lip. Mr. Wall likewise turned; but on his face there was a reassuring smile.

And George? George stood there as one in a dream; his face changing to perplexity, his eyes strained to wonder, his fingers intertwined with the nervous grasp of emotion.

"What have you been guilty of, sir, to cause this change of intentions?" shouted Mr. Chattaway.

"He has not been guilty of anything," interposed Mr. Wall, who appeared to be enjoying a smile at George's astonishment and Mr. Chattaway's discomfiture. "Don't blame the boy. So far as I know and believe, he has striven to do his best ever since he has been here."

"Then why won't you take him? You *will* take him," added Mr. Chattaway, in a more agreeable voice, as the idea dawned upon him that Mr. Wall had been joking.

"Indeed, I will not. If Mrs. Ryle offered me a thousand pounds premium with him, I should not take him."

Mr. Chattaway's small eyes opened to their utmost width. "And why would you not?"

"Because, knowing what I know now, I believe that I should be committing an injustice upon the boy; an injustice which nothing could repair. To condemn a youth to pass the best years of his life at an uncongenial pursuit, to make the pursuit his calling, is a cruel injustice, wherever it is knowingly inflicted. I myself was a victim to it."

"My boy," added Mr. Wall, laying his hand on George's shoulder, "you have a marked distaste to the mercery business. Is it not so? Speak out fearlessly. Don't regard me as your master—I shall never be that, you hear—but as your friend."

"Yes, I have," replied George.

"You think it a cruel piece of injustice to have put you to it: you shall never more feel an interest in life; you'd as soon be with poor Mr. Ryle in his coffin! And when you are out of your time, you mean to start for India or some out-of-the-world place, and begin life afresh!"

George was too much confused to answer. His face turned scarlet. Undoubtedly Mr. Wall had overheard his conversation with Nora.

Mr. Chattaway was looking red and angry. When his face did turn red, it presented a charming brick-dust hue. "It is only scamps who take a dislike to what they are put to," he exclaimed. "And their dislike is all pretence."

"I differ from you in both propositions," replied Mr. Wall. "At any rate, I do not think it the case with your nephew."

Mr. Chattaway's brick-dust turned to green. "He is no nephew of mine. What next will you say, Wall?"

"Your step-nephew, then, to be correct," equably rejoined Mr. Wall. "You remember when we left school together, you

and I, and began to turn our thoughts to the business of life? Your father wished you to go into the bank as clerk, you know; and mine——"

"But he did not get his wish, more's the luck," again interposed Mr. Chattaway, not pleased at the allusion. "A poor start in life that would have been for the future Squire of Trevlyn Hold."

"Pooh!" rejoined Mr. Wall, in a good-tempered, matter-of-fact tone. "You did not expect then to be exalted to Trevlyn Hold. Nonsense, Chattaway! We are old friends, you know. But, let me continue. I overheard a certain conversation of this boy's with Nora Dickson, and it seemed to bring my own early life back to me. With every word that he spoke, I had a fellow-feeling. My father insisted that I should follow the same business that he was in; this. He carried on a successful trade for years, in this very house, and nothing would do but I must succeed him in it. In vain I urged my repugnance to it, my dislike; in vain I said I had formed other views for myself; I was not listened to. In those days it was not the fashion for sons to run counter to their fathers' will; at least, such was my experience; and into the business I came. I have reconciled myself to it by dint of time and habit; liked it, I never have; and I have always felt that it was—as I heard this boy express it—a cruel wrong to force me into it. You cannot, therefore, be surprised that I decline so to force another. I will never do it knowingly."

"You decline absolutely to take him?" asked Mr. Chattaway.

"Absolutely and positively. He can remain in the house a few days longer if it will suit his convenience, or he can leave to-day. I am not displeased with you," added Mr. Wall, turning to George, and holding out his hand. "We shall part good friends."

George seized it and grasped it, his countenance glowing, a whole world of gratitude shining from his eyes as he lifted them to Mr. Wall. "I shall always think you have been the best friend I ever had, sir, next to my father."

"I hope it will prove so, George. I hope you will find some pursuit in life more congenial to you than this."

Mr. Chattaway took his hat and his whip from the table. "This will be fine news for your mother, sir!" cried he, severely, to George.

"It may turn out well for her," replied George, boldly. "My

belief is that the farm never would have got along with John Pinder for its manager."

"You think you would make a better?" said Mr. Chattaway, his thin lip curling.

"I can be true to her, at any rate," said George. "And I can have my eyes about me."

"Good morning," resumed Mr. Chattaway to Mr. Wall, putting out unwillingly the tips of two of his fingers.

Mr. Wall laughed as he grasped them. "I do not see why you should be vexed, Mr. Chattaway. The boy is no son of yours. For myself, all I can say is, that I have been actuated by motives of regard for his interest."

"It remains to be proved whether it will be for his interest," coldly rejoined Mr. Chattaway. "Were I his mother, and this check were dealt out to me, I should send him off to break stones on the road. Good morning, Wall. And I beg you will not bring me here again upon a fool's errand."

George went into the shop, to get from it some personal trifles that he had left there. He deemed it well to depart at once, and carry, himself, the news home to Mrs. Ryle. The cards and trimmings lay in the unfinished state that he had left them. What a change, that moment and this! One or two of the employés noticed his radiant countenance.

"Has anything happened?" they asked.

"Yes," answered George. "I have been suddenly lifted into elysium."

He started on his way, leaving his things to be sent after him. His footsteps scarcely touched the ground. Not a rough ridge of the road, felt he; not a sharp stone; not a hill. Only when he turned in at the gate did he remember there was his mother's displeasure to be met and grappled with.

Nora gave a shriek when he entered the house. "*George!* Whatever brings you here?"

"Where's mamma?" was George's only answer.

"She's in the best parlour," said Nora. "And I can tell you that she's not in the best of humours just now, so I'd advise you not to go in."

"What about?" asked George, taking it for granted that she had heard the news about himself, and that that was the grievance. But he was agreeably undeceived.

"It's about John Pinder. He has been having two of the meads ploughed up, and he never asked the missis first. She *is* angry."

"Has Chattaway been here to see mamma, Nora?"

"He came up here on horseback in a desperate hurry half-an-hour ago; but she was out on the farm, so he said he'd call again. It was through her going abroad this morning that she discovered what they were about with the fields. She says she thinks John Pinder must be going out of his mind, to take things upon himself in the way he is doing."

George bent his steps to the drawing-room. Mrs. Ryle was seated before her desk, writing a note. The expression of her face as she looked up at George between the white lappets of her widow's cap, was resolutely severe. It changed to astonishment.

Strange to say, she was writing to Mr. Wall to stop the signature of the indentures, or to desire that they might be cancelled if signed. She could not do without George at home, she said; and she told him why she could not.

"Mamma," said George, "will you be angry if I tell you something that has struck me in all this?"

"Tell it," said Mrs. Ryle.

"I feel quite certain that Chattaway has been acting with a motive; that he has some private reason for wishing to get me away from home. That's what he has been working for; otherwise he would never have troubled himself about me. It is not in his nature."

Mrs. Ryle gazed at George steadfastly, as if weighing his words, and presently knitted her brow. George could read her countenance tolerably well. He felt sure she had arrived at a similar conclusion, and that it irritated her. He resumed.

"It looks bad for you, mamma; but you must not think I say this selfishly. Twenty times I have asked myself the question, Why does he wish me away? And I can only think that he would like the farm to go to rack and ruin, so that you may be driven off it."

"Nonsense, George."

"Well, I can't tell what else it can be."

"If so, he is defeated," said Mrs. Ryle. "You will take your place as master of the farm to-day, George, under me. Deferring to me in all things, you understand; giving no orders on your own responsibility, taking my pleasure upon the merest trifle."

"I should not think of doing otherwise," replied George. "I will do my best for you in all ways, mamma. You will soon see how useful I can be."

"Very well. But I may as well mention one thing to you. When Treve shall be old enough, it is he who will be master here, and you must resign the place to him. It is not that I wish to set the younger of your father's sons unjustly above the head of the elder. This farm will be a living but for one of you; barely that; and I prefer that Treve should have it; he is my own son. We will endeavour to find a better farm for you, George, before that time shall come."

"Just as you please," said George, cheerfully. "Now that I am emancipated from that dreadful nightmare, my prospects look very bright to me. I'll do the best I can on the farm, remembering that I do it for Treve's future benefit; not for mine. Something else will turn up for me, no doubt, before I'm ready for it."

"Which will not be for some years to come," said Mrs. Ryle, feeling pleased with the boy's cheerful, acquiescent spirit. "Treve will not be old enough for——"

Mrs. Ryle was interrupted. The door had opened, and there appeared Mr. Chattaway, showing himself in. Nora never affected to be too courteous to that gentleman; and on his coming to the house to ask for Mrs. Ryle a second time, she had curtly answered that Mrs. Ryle was in the best parlour (the more familiar name for the drawing-room in the farm-house), and allowed him to find his own way to it.

Mr. Chattaway looked surprised at seeing George; he had not bargained for his arriving home so soon. Extending his hand towards him, he turned to Mrs. Ryle.

"There's a dutiful son for you! You hear what he has done?—returned on your hands as a bale of worthless goods."

"Yes, I hear that Mr. Wall has declined to take him," was her composed answer. "It has happened for the best. When he arrived just now, I was writing to Mr. Wall, requesting that he might *not* be bound."

"And why?" asked Mr. Chattaway, in considerable amazement.

"I find that I am unable to do without him," said Mrs. Ryle, her tone harder and firmer than ever; her eyes, stern and steady, thrown full on Chattaway. "I have tried the experiment, and it has failed. I cannot do without one by my side devoted to my interests; and John Pinder cannot get on without a master."

"And do you think you'll find what you want in him!—in that inexperienced schoolboy?" burst forth Mr. Chattaway.

"I do," replied Mrs. Ryle, her tone so significantly decisive as to be almost offensive. "He takes his standing from this day as master of Trevlyn Farm; subject only to me."

"I wish you joy of him!" angrily returned Chattaway. "But you must understand, Mrs. Ryle, that your having a boy at the head of affairs will oblige me to look more keenly after my interests."

"My arrangements with you are settled," she said. "So long as I fulfil my part, that is all that concerns you, James Chattaway."

"You'll not fulfil it, if you put him at the head of things."

"When I fail, you can come here and tell me of it. Until then, I would prefer that you should not intrude on Trevlyn Farm."

She rang the bell violently as she spoke, and Molly, who was passing along the passage, immediately appeared. Mrs. Ryle extended her hand imperiously, the forefinger pointed out.

"The door for Mr. Chattaway."

CHAPTER X.

MADAM'S ROOM.

LEADING out of Mrs. Chattaway's dressing-room was a comfortable apartment, fitted up as a sitting-room, its hangings of chintz, and its furniture maple-wood. It was called in the household "Madam's Room," and it was where Mrs. Chattaway frequently sat. Yes; the house and the neighbourhood accorded her readily the title which usage had long given to the mistress of Trevlyn Hold: but they would not give that of "Squire" to her husband. I wish particularly to repeat this. Strive for it as he would, force his personal servants to observe the title as he did, he could not get it recognized or adopted. When a written invitation came to the Hold—a rare event, for the good old-fashioned custom of inviting verbally was chiefly followed there—it would be worded, "Mr. and Madam Chattaway," and Chattaway's face would turn green as he read it. No, never! He enjoyed the substantial good of being proprietor of Trevlyn Hold, he received its revenues, he held sway as its lord and master; but its honours were not given to him. It was so much gall and wormwood to Chattaway.

Mrs. Chattaway stood at this window on that dull morning in November mentioned in the last chapter, her eyes strained outwards. What was she gazing at? Those lodge chimneys? —The dark and almost bare trees that waved to and fro in the wintry wind?—The extensive landscape stretching out in the distance, not fine to-day, but dull and cheerless?—Or on the shifting clouds in the grey skies? Not on any of these; her eyes, though apparently bent on all, in reality saw nothing. They were fixed in vacancy; buried, like her thoughts, inwards.

She wore a muslin gown with dark purple spots upon it; her collar was fastened with a bow of black ribbon, her sleeves were confined with black ribbons at the wrist. She was passing a finger under one of these wrist-ribbons, round and round, as if the ribbon were tight; in point of fact, it was a proof of her abstraction, and she knew not that she was doing it. Her smooth hair fell in curls on her fair face, and her blue eyes were bright as with a slight touch of inward fever.

Some one opened the door, and peeped in. It was Maude Trevlyn. Her frock was of the same material as Mrs. Chattaway's gown, and a sash of black ribbon encircled her waist. Mrs. Chattaway did not turn, and Maude came forward.

"Are you well to-day, Aunt Edith?"

"Not very, dear." Mrs. Chattaway took the pretty young head within her arm as she answered, and fondly stroked the bright curls. "You have been crying, Maude!"

Maude shook back her curls with a smile, as if she meant to be brave; to make light of the accusation. "Cris and Octave went on so shamefully, Aunt Edith, ridiculing George Ryle; and when I took his part, Cris hit me here"—pointing to the side of her face—"a sharp blow. It was stupid of me to cry, though."

"Cris did?" exclaimed Mrs. Chattaway.

"I know I provoked him," candidly acknowledged Maude. "I'm afraid I flew into a passion; and you know, Aunt Edith, I don't mind what I say when I do that. I told Cris that he would be placed at something not half as good as a linen-draper's some time, for he'd want a living when Rupert came into Trevlyn Hold."

"Maude! Maude! hush!" exclaimed Mrs. Chattaway in a tone of terror. "You must not say that."

"I know I must not, Aunt Edith; I know it is wrong; wrong to think it, and foolish to say it. It was my temper. I am very sorry."

She nestled close to Mrs. Chattaway, caressing and penitent.