

‘The Two Christmas Days’

On the outskirts of a somewhat secluded but very picturesque village in Devonshire was situated Miss Bidwell's establishment for young ladies. It was not merely a highly respectable one, but (as the friends and patrons of Miss Bidwell used to say when recommending it) a very aristocratic one also; for no young lady under the rank of a banker's or merchant's daughter was admitted within that exclusive circle. Indeed, the prospectus itself pointedly and ostentatiously announced that ‘no tradesmen's daughters were received.’ The school consisted of about forty pupils, of all ages between eight and eighteen; and at least half of them were the daughters, nieces, or cousins of titled personages. But why, the reader will ask, were these fair young scions of such high-born or such wealthy families sent to this far-off seminary in a secluded village of Devonshire. It was because the place was remarkable for its salubrity, especially for young persons with weak chests or sickly constitutions; and many a drooping flower had there been resuscitated into the fullest and healthiest bloom.

We are about to introduce our reader to the interior of Miss Bidwell's establishment, on the morning of December 12th, 1855. It was a fine crisp winter's day: the hoar-frost covered the ground and gave fantastic shapes to the skeleton branches of the trees and the leafless hedges; but the sun was shining brightly, so that there was cheerfulness in its beams as well as an exhilaration in the bracing air. All was bustle, both inside and outside the walls of the seminary. Boxes were being packed up, housemaids and parlour-maids were distracted because they could not each be in half a dozen places at once: the teachers were of course helping – even the services of the cook were put into requisition – while the pupils themselves, joyous and excited, ran hither and thither in search of articles, previously forgotten, or frisked dancingly about at the prospect of returning home. For this was breaking-up day – the Christmas holidays were at hand, carriages, frys, and railway omnibuses were waiting to convey the happy party to the nearest station, which was about four miles distant.

The schoolroom rang with the sounds of cheerful voices, and the atmosphere was filled with the harmony of musical laughter. The silvery notes of joy flowed forth from the lips of all save *one*; and every countenance was lighted up with beaming smiles, with the solitary exception just mentioned. It was that of a tall and beautiful girl, who had seated herself apart from the joyous groups, upon whom her eyes were mournfully bent, but none of whom had now leisure to take any notice of her. Her well-shaped head, which nature had intended to set proudly on the swan-like neck, drooped like a flower upon its stalk; while the coral lips, kept apart by some deep inward emotion, and the fixed but mournful gaze of the dark blue eyes gave to the countenance an expression of pale statuesque beauty. The face was oval; the features, delicately aquiline, were of that aristocratic type which is usually associated with our ideas of the highest breeding.

Such was Isabel Vere – an orphan dependent upon an old uncle, who cared nothing at all for her, and who, though rich, almost grudgingly paid the requisite stipend which for the last half-dozen years had enabled her to dwell as an inmate of Miss Bidwell’s establishment. The Honourable Mr. Trafford, being a bachelor, merely occupied a set of chambers in London, and lived almost entirely at his Club, so that he had no establishment at which a young lady could be received; and perhaps the selfish old gentleman was by no means sorry to have this as an excuse for leaving his niece to pass the holidays at school.

It is true that she had a few other relations; but they were distant ones, and she scarcely knew them. At all events she derived no advantage from the kinship. Her nearest relative was her cousin, the young Marquis of Somerton, not yet of age, and who was graduating in all kinds of dissipation and wild excess at Oxford. Another cousin was named Frank Portland, whose family had once dwelt in the actual neighbourhood of Miss Bidwell’s school; but Frank himself had been for several years absent, and rumour spoke not favourably of his character. It is needless to mention any others of Miss Vere's kinsfolk, for they had never noticed her since her parents died; and as they had thus seemed to have forgotten her, Isabel was too proud to pen even a single syllable to remind them of her existence.

Let us return to the thread of our narrative. In the midst of the joyousness and excitement which prevailed in the schoolroom, the door opened, and a tall, thin, middle-aged lady made her appearance, ushering in a short, stout, elderly, red-faced personage, whose costume denoted the clergyman. His demeanour was habitually pompous and self-sufficient – his manner dogmatic and dictatorial; but he could assume the most sycophantic suavity of look and manner when addressing any of the high-born damsels of the establishment. This was the rector of the parish.

‘Young ladies,’ said Miss Bidwell – for she was the tall, thin, middle-aged lady, ‘here is Dr. Blossom, come to bid you all farewell, and to express the devout hope – ’

‘Exactly so, Ma'am,’ interrupted the reverend gentleman, with a smile half serious, half cringing, ‘a devout hope that every rational enjoyment may characterize the present vacation, and that at the end thereof you may all return with a new zest for the delectable studies which you have the superlative happiness to pursue under the fostering care of my excellent friend Miss Bidwell.’

‘Do you hear, young ladies ?’ asked Miss Troutbeck, the first teacher. ‘Fostering care !’

‘Excellent phrase, young ladies;’ said Miss Pugh, the writing mistress.

‘Very appropriate,’ added Miss Tank, the teacher of the younger girls.

‘What for he preach de sermon now ?’ murmured Mademoiselle Trictrac, the French and music governess, a little, plain-faced, but good-natured creature; whereas Miss Troutbeck, Miss Pugh,

and Miss Tank were all three tall, thin, demure, and old-maidish, after the precise fashion of their mistress.

The elder portion of the young ladies smiled with courteous affability at the pompous divine; but some of the younger pupils laughed outright. Miss Tank was inclined to scold them; but there was now no time, for the boxes were all packed and conveyed to the vehicles – the moment had come for departure, and the hurry and bustle of leave taking ensued.

‘Good-bye, Ma'am. Good morning, Doctor. Good-bye, Miss Troutbeck – and you, Miss Pugh and you, Miss Tank. Ah, adieu, Mademoiselle! Dear me, I had quite forgotten poor Isabel ! Goodbye, Isabel dear ! Don't mope, but keep up your spirits – and all that sort of thing. I shall think of you on Christmas Day – at least, I will try, if I have time.’

In such a strain were the leave-takings for the most part hurried over; and Isabel Vere, conquering her emotions with an almost superhuman effort, acknowledged with a certain coldness, in which there was also a blending tincture of *hauteur* and contempt, the heartless, hollow, and unfeeling farewells that were thus hastily and carelessly flung at her. But in the depths of her soul there were the liveliest emotions stirring – and in her heart of hearts her inward voice was saying, ‘And I *too* shall think of you in your happy homes while I am alone, forgotten, and neglected here on Christmas Day !’

The joyous troop of merry, holiday-seeking damsels poured forth from the schoolroom; they quickly took their seats in the carriages, handkerchiefs were waved from the windows, and were responded to by Miss Bidwell, her teachers, and Dr. Blossom, who had gone out to see them off. The equipages drove away, bearing light hearts and the music of merry voices to the railway station. Isabel was now alone; and the sense of that loneliness suddenly struck her with a penetrating pang, as if an ice-shaft had pierced through her brain, or an arrow of fire had transfixed her heart. All her natural pride and habitual strength of mind forsook her; that cold, calm firmness which had so often enabled her to keep back the scalding tears, or to treat innuendo with contempt and insult with disdain, melted away; and sinking down upon her seat, she burst forth into a paroxysm of weeping.

‘My vare dear Mademoiselle,’ said a voice, speaking softly and soothingly in her ear, while an arm was thrown round her waist, and a face peered over her shoulder; ‘what for you take on like dis ? Oh, me love you, dear Isabel ! Me – me – no like for to see you cry—y – y !’ And the voice of the kind-hearted little French governess was tremulous with emotion; and as Isabel turned quickly round to snatch her hand, and press it in fervid thankfulness for her sympathy, she beheld two big tears trickling down Mademoiselle Trictrac's cheeks. But at that moment Mademoiselle Trictrac skipped away as if galvanized with a sudden terror; for the fact was she had just caught sight of certain persons recrossing the threshold of the schoolroom, and the poor little French woman stood in mortal terror of Miss Bidwell.

'Hey-day ! what have we now ?' cried the sharp vixenish voice of this lady, while all the holiday smiles she had just worn seemed to congeal into wrinkles of spite and ill-humour. 'Tears indeed ! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Miss Vere ! – a young lady of your age. Eighteen last birthday ! Let me see – when was that ?' 'I do not recollect,' answered Isabel, with a sort of sullen defiance, as she dashed away her tears. 'My birthday is never kept here.'

'And pray whose fault is that, Miss ?' struck in Miss Bidwell. 'You do not think it is for me to provide plum-cake – '

'And currant wine,' said Miss Troutbeck.

'And almonds and raisins,' interjected Miss Pugh.

'And oranges,' superadded Miss Tank.

'At my own expense,' pursued Miss Bidwell: 'for you know very well that if the other young ladies' birthdays are kept, it is because their parents supply the means.'

'Yes,' muttered Mademoiselle Trictrac, 'and dat means also for all de young ladies to make von vare fine present to Miss Bidwell on *her* birthday.'

'What were you saying to yourself there, Mademoiselle ?' demanded the schoolmistress, turning sharply round upon the little Frenchwoman; for she had overheard the muttering, but had failed to catch its sense.

'I say no ting vare particular,' replied Mademoiselle Trictrac, looking half-frightened. 'But poor dear Mademoiselle Vere, she can no help for to cry. It's so natural.'

'Hold your tongue, Mademoiselle,' exclaimed Miss Bidwell; 'and don't let me catch you encouraging her in her childish humours for the future. I will have no whimpering beneath my roof. What an appearance it has ! I am sure if Dr Blossom did not know how kind and good I am to all – '

'So considerate and forgiving !' said Troutbeck.

'So warm and generous-hearted !' interjected Miss Pugh.

'So good a Christian !' added Miss Tank.

'Yes, my dear Madam,' said Dr. Blossom, 'your good qualities are widely known and universally appreciated. If Miss Vere' – and the Doctor drew himself up pompously – 'if Miss Vere will permit me, as a spiritual pastor, to admonish her upon the necessity of putting a curb upon those feelings which are so rebellious against the wise decrees of Heaven – if, my dear Madam, she would only bear in mind the many obligations under which she lies towards you – '

‘Obligations, Sir?’ interrupted Isabel: and it seemed as if all the haughty blood of the race from which she was sprung flushed over the clear fair countenance. ‘Obligations, Sir? You are mistaken! I owe Miss Bidwell none. If I had ever received kindnesses at her hand, I should be her debtor. But for all else I have ever obtained beneath this roof – food, bed, and education—she has been paid.’

‘If you come to that, Miss Vere,’ said the school mistress spitefully, ‘your uncle Mr. Trafford has often let the account stand over for weeks and weeks, till I have written to remind him of it.’ ‘The interest of the money thus lost’ observed Miss Troutbeck. ‘Besides the ungentlemanly behaviour,’ interjected Miss Pugh. ‘I’m sure I wonder Miss Vere doesn’t blush for her uncle,’ added Miss Tank. ‘Me wonder vare much she no blush for every von of you,’ muttered Mademoiselle Trictrac to herself.

At the same instant Isabel, goaded almost to madness by the cruel reproaches, taunts, and innuendoes of which she was the object, darted abruptly from the schoolroom – and hurrying up to her chamber, put on her bonnet and shawl; then quickly descending a back staircase, she sped forth rapidly from the house.

But why was Isabel Vere thus treated by the schoolmistress and the three sycophantic English teachers? Why also had she been looked so coldly upon and had been left so uncared for by her schoolfellows when they took their departure just now?

The answers to these queries are easily given. Isabel Vere was the most beautiful and the most accomplished girl in the school; and therefore all the others hated her through jealousy and envy. Miss Bidwell persecuted her, because she thereby pleased thirty-nine other young ladies by her treatment of this one; and it was a very safe piece of tyranny to practise, inasmuch as the poor victim had no one who would listen to her, even if she ventured to complain. Of course the three English teachers took their cue from Miss Bidwell in all things, and their malice was consequently rather imitative than spontaneous. It may be easily understood that good family descent availed not as a protective influence in an establishment of young ladies consisting only of the representatives of the two aristocracies, Birth and Money. Besides, Isabella was kept short of pocket-money, and did not dress half so well as any of her schoolfellows.

This was another reason why she was looked down upon. Even the very female servants treated Miss Vere as one who could always wait until last to be served, with anything she wanted. Poor Mademoiselle Trictrac was the only friend she had; but the good-hearted little Frenchwoman, dependent upon her situation for her own bread, was compelled to be more or less cautious even in the bestowal of sympathizing looks or kind whispered words upon Isabel Vere.

At first Isabel had endeavoured to conciliate those around her by the gentleness of her manners and her obliging position; but when she found that she failed, her inner natural pride would not let her stoop any lower. She could not cringe nor play the sycophant – she therefore shut herself

up in that cold reserve which often belongs to such dispositions as hers; and perhaps this demeanour only tended to augment the general feeling of dislike against her.

Now that the reader is fully acquainted with the character of Isabel Vere, let us follow her as she hurried away from the seminary. She had no settled purpose in view. She certainly had no thought of quitting for ever the only place which she could call her home; and she did not mean to fling herself into the river which meandered near, although her steps were now bent in that direction. Her pride and self-respect on the one hand would not permit her voluntarily to become a vagabond fugitive; while on the other hand her religious feelings and her natural firmness of character would not allow her to become a suicide.

She only wanted to breathe the fresh air – to escape from the taunts of her persecutors – to be alone with her own thoughts. When she was beyond the precincts of the grounds attached to the school, she relaxed her pace, and, crossing the bridge, struck into a path which led through a wood of small extent, and at the extremity of which stood a spacious mansion which had been shut up for about seven years. This was once the residence of the Portland family, to whom Isabel was distantly related, as we have before hinted. Indeed, it was from the fact of her uncle, the Hon. Mr. Trafford, having been a visitor some years back at Portland Hall, that he had become acquainted with Miss Bidwell's establishment, and had therefore consigned his niece to that lady's charge when the death of the poor girl's parents left her an orphan dependent upon him.

Isabel was pursuing her walk through the wood, giving way to her mournful reflections, and now and then fixing her handsome blue eyes upon the tall old-fashioned chimneys of the Hall which towered above the trees at a little distance, when all of a sudden she was startled by the report of a gun, and in a few moments a sportsman emerged from the thicket. An involuntary cry had burst from Isabel's lips at the abrupt explosion of the firearm; and the sportsman, politely raising his cap, said 'I am afraid that I have frightened you. But if so, I tender my warmest apology –'

'Pray do not mention it, Sir,' interrupted Isabel, immediately regaining her presence of mind, and blushing for her momentary terror. 'It was my fault if I chose for my walk a place where I ought to know that game abounds, and that sportsmen are therefore likely to be met with.' 'But,' said the gentleman – for such he evidently was, by his looks, speech, and manners – 'as a slight acknowledgment for the alarm which I have caused, will you not permit me to offer, with all sportsman-like frankness, this brace of pheasants? They are really superb; and if you will allow me, I myself will carry them to your abode.'

For a moment Isabel's head was bending in cold though courteous refusal of a gift which was indeed somewhat bluntly proffered; but the next instant she all of a sudden burst out laughing. 'I am glad I have been able to inspire you with merriment,' said the stranger, now smiling himself, and thereby revealing a set of fine teeth which, however, were only becomingly matched with the regular features of a very handsome countenance. 'May I be permitted to learn the cause of your

mirth Sincerely do I hope that it was no awkwardness or impropriety on my part' – and a shade suddenly came over that fine manly countenance.

'Oh no – no !' Isabel hastened to exclaim. 'But I was only thinking at the moment what on earth Miss Bidwell and the English teachers would say if they saw you marching up to the front-door with a brace of pheasants for one of the pupils. You will forgive me for my rudeness in laughing –'

'Do not mention it. On the contrary, I can now laugh with you at the idea, which indeed would be comical enough. But you are at Miss Bidwell's ?'

'Yes,' rejoined Isabel. 'Perhaps you are surprised to learn that I still remain there, although this is breaking-up day ?'

'I was rather surprised that a young lady of your age should be at school – But pray excuse me if I have said something to annoy or afflict you ! Heaven knows I would not do so wilfully.'

There was such a kind and almost tender earnestness in the stranger's tone that Isabel looked up at him through the tears which had suddenly started into her eyes; and her countenance showed that she was not offended. Can the reader be surprised that the words of kindness, even when flowing from the lips of a stranger, sank deep into the heart of the neglected and uncared-for girl ? Especially, too, when we come to consider that this said stranger was a remarkably handsome young man, of about five or six and twenty, and with a shape of faultless symmetry.

'I remain at school,' resumed Isabel, urged on she knew not by what feeling to speak thus confidentially to the young man, instead of immediately taking leave of him – 'I remain at school because it is my only home. Certainly I can learn no more there – my education is finished –'

'And have you no relations – to, to – give you a home ?' asked the stranger, gently and hesitatingly.

'I have relations – but none in a condition to give me a home. I have an uncle – an old bachelor – who lives in London. He is rich, but mean – and I am dependent on him. Then – but I am not going to tell you this through mere idle boasting – I merely mention it because it really *does* seem strange that I, who can say that I belong to a family in which there are two peerages, though now united in one person, should be left in so neglected and forlorn a condition. Yet so it is ! I have a cousin who enjoys a marquise on the paternal side and an earldom on the maternal – because his mother was created a countess in her own right.'

'Ah !' said the stranger, who seemed interested in the somewhat prattling discourse of the beautiful and artless girl. 'And this noble cousin of yours ?'

‘He is a mere youth – only a year or two older than I am. I have not seen him for some years. He never writes to me – I am forgotten or ignored by all my relations !’ She sighed: ‘But what would you think,’ she suddenly went on to say, regaining her prattling liveliness, ‘if I were to tell you that the owner of yon shut-up mansion is also a cousin of mine ?’

‘Indeed what – ’ ‘Well, perhaps I had better have kept it to myself; for I have heard Miss Bidwell and Dr. Blossom say that Frank Portland is a sad wild fellow, and that he has very strong reasons for keeping abroad on the Continent – where he has been, I believe, ever since his father’s death, some seven years ago, just before I came to school here. I never saw Frank – at least not to my recollection. But perhaps, after all, Miss Bidwell and the Doctor exaggerated a little. I know they are very fond of scandal; and I should not like to think that a relation of mine has been represented in worse colours than he deserves. Yet you, perhaps, can tell me something on the subject ? I suppose you live in this neighbourhood ?’

‘I only arrived here a day or two ago,’ answered the sportsman. ‘I am staying with a friend in the neighbourhood, who invited me down for a little shooting and hunting. Still I have heard something – though very little indeed – about Frank Portland and the other branches of the family to which you must evidently belong, for, as I have been told, the Marquis of Somerton is a distant connection of Mr. Portland's, I may suppose that it is this self-same marquis who is the cousin you just now spoke of ?’

‘True,’ replied the maiden. ‘I belong to the Vere branch of the family; and it is through his connection with this branch that my cousin has inherited the Earldom of Melcombe, as well as the Marquisate of Somerton.’

‘You have given me your confidence,’ said the sportsman, gazing upon Isabel with a look in which curiosity, compassion, interest, and admiration were all more or less blended, ‘but in return I have nothing to tell you, except to name myself, And this I really hesitate to do – ,’ ‘And why ?’ asked Isabel, ingenuously. ‘Because you, who bear the aristocratic name of Vere, and have the blood of the Somertons and Melcombes in your veins, will smile – perhaps contemptuously – at the plain plebeian one of Watson. Yet James Watson is my name, and I do not know that I have any reason to be ashamed of it.’

‘Oh, Mr. Watson, you fancy that I am proud.’ ejaculated Isabel. ‘And now I bethink me, I must repeat my thanks for the offer of the game: but, as you perceive, I dare not accept it. Good morning.’ And with a gracious inclination of the head, Isabel passed on through the wood, leaving the young sportsman, who had again doffed his cap in respectful salutation, gazing after her with unspeakable admiration and interest in his looks.

Now let it be fairly and honestly avowed that Isabel Vere was often in the habit of walking through that wood, in the winter as well as in the summer, so that she might enjoy the melancholy pleasure of gazing at the shut-up mansion as a memorial, though a sad one, of one

portion of her family connections. There was an old gardener left in charge of the place; but he was not only deaf, he was likewise reserved and cross – so that three or four endeavours which Isabel had at different times made to engage him in conversation had utterly failed. Once she had asked him to let her enter the garden and view the premises: but he had rudely turned his back upon her, and she had not repeated her demand. The rebuff, however, had not prevented her from frequently bending her steps in that direction, to contemplate the place which had once been the home of her kinsfolk.

We have merely entered into these little particulars in order to account for the fact that Isabel might again be seen threading the pathway through the wood on the day after her meeting with James Watson. But perhaps the reader will think that some other feeling inspired her, and that she pursued her way wondering whether the handsome young sportsman would again make his appearance there? Be the case as it may, very certain it is that Isabel's walk was again taken in the wood, and that she did again encounter James Watson there. And thus several days passed away – and each forenoon there was the same meeting in the same place. No actual appointment was made; but, by a species of tacit understanding, each was punctual to the usual hour.

Whence could such an understanding arise? Was it that the words of kindness which the young sportsman breathed in the maiden's ear made her desire each successive day to listen to a repetition of them? Was it that his whole manner towards her, so tender and yet so respectful, inspired her with confidence in him? Was it that the long-neglected girl began to experience the charm of a companionship such as she had never known before? And, on the other hand, was it that James Watson felt, when he looked into the depths of those superb blue eyes, that there was something which touched a new chord in his breast, and seemed to call forth from his inward soul those responsive tones which might become the accompanying music of a life?

In one word, was it that they grew rapidly and insensibly to love each other? Most probably it was so: but, at all events, Isabel did not altogether comprehend the state of her own feelings—while James Watson, though beginning full well to understand his own, nevertheless made no avowal. Perhaps he thought, with becoming delicacy, that an acquaintance of a dozen days or so was somewhat too short to warrant such a proceeding, or perhaps he had other reasons with which we are not yet acquainted.

Christmas Day arrived; and at its dawn it seemed to promise to be a much happier one than Isabel Vere could possibly have anticipated, when, on the occasion of the breaking-up of the school, she had shudderingly looked forward to an almost utter loneliness on this particular day. But it was with a light heart that she rose and performed her toilet; for she was looking forward to that pleasing event which she was now accustomed to expect -- namely, the usual meeting with James Watson. She accompanied Miss Bidwell and the teachers to church, where the curate – a modest, diffident, and amiable young man – read the service, and where Dr. Blossom seemed

more pompous than ever in his exhortation from the pulpit. At length Isabel was free to dispose of her own time for two or three hours, as she thought fit; and away she sped to the wood.

It was what some persons call a regular old-fashioned Christmas Day, with the snow upon the ground – bitterly cold – but with the sun shining sufficiently to give a certain air of cheerfulness to the scene. As Isabel entered the wood, James Watson hastened towards her with more than his accustomed speed; and as he drew nigh, it at once struck her that there was some change in the expression of his countenance.

‘Isabel,’ he said, taking her hand, and pressing it with a degree of fervour which he had never before permitted himself to display, ‘I am so glad you have come thus early! Half an hour sooner than I could have expected ! I feared—yes, I feared that I should be compelled to leave without seeing you.’

‘To leave ?’ echoed Miss Vere, in mingled surprise and dismay; and her face, naturally pale, became almost of an ashy whiteness.

‘Oh, you know not how distressed I am !’ resumed Watson, and his looks corroborated his words. ‘Circumstances over which I have no control – pressing business – I mean, in a word, it is absolutely necessary and urgent that I should leave with the least possible delay.’

‘But perhaps not for long ?’ said Isabel, eagerly. ‘No, no – I hope not for long – I cannot exactly say. Rest assured that I shall be only too glad to return hither and renew—my – my’ – he seemed to hesitate for a word; then he said, ‘my acquaintance with one whom I never, never can forget. Oh !’ and he pressed his hand to his brow, ‘I could say so much ! – But no, no ! – I dare not.’

‘What is it that you would say ?’ asked Isabel, whose eyes were dimmed with tears and whose bosom was throbbing violently. ‘Tell me !’ ‘Not now, Isabel ! Not now ! No, no !’ he exclaimed, passionately; ‘I ought not – I must not Besides, I have not a moment to spare !’ – and he seemed to fling a quick anxious glance around. ‘We shall meet again -- yes, we shall meet again, Isabel ! Trust to my – my friendship – my – ’

He stopped short; the word *love* was upon the very tip of his tongue – but by almost a preternatural effort he called it back; and again his hand was swept, as if with a sense of inward anguish, across his brow.

‘Farewell, my sweet dear friend—farewell !’ he said, in a voice full of emotion. ‘Oh, you are weeping ! you are sad at parting from me !’

‘Yes – very, very sad,’ murmured Isabel, in a half-stifling voice. ‘You are the only friend I have ever known since my parents’ death.’

‘Good heavens ! to hear these words from your lips, and yet to be compelled to leave you !’ – and unable any longer to master his feelings, the young man caught the young damsel to his breast.

Then did he cull the first fond kiss of affection: then for the first time was the cheek of the high-born virgin pressed by the lips of a lover – and she yielded herself to that embrace; for even amidst the bewilderment of her mind the truth flashed in upon her that this was the sentiment of love !

At that instant voices were heard speaking at a little distance, and both the lovers flung terrified looks around them.

‘Farewell – farewell, dearest ! God in heaven bless you !’ and pressing her hand while he bent upon her a last look of ineffable fondness, James Watson darted away from the spot, and plunging into a bye-path, was in a moment lost to her view.

For a few instants Isabel remained rooted to the ground, as if in a dream which had something most pleasing as well as most torturing in it. But she was quickly startled again by the sounds of approaching voices; and she had only just time to conceal herself behind some evergreens at a little distance, when she beheld two persons pass slowly along the path which she had just quitted. To her surprise she at once recognised Mr. Morton, the young curate, and Mademoiselle Tricrac, the French governess. They were walking arm-in-arm, and their discourse seemed to be of a somewhat tender nature. Isabel Vere, however, was in no mood to trouble herself even for an instant with the concerns of others; but slowly and mournfully she turned away from her hiding-place, and retraced her steps towards the school.

How differently passed this Christmas Day from the promise which it had seemed to hold forth at its dawn ! Previous Christmas days had been miserable enough, when spent within those cold, cheerless walls; but this was the most wretched, wretched Christmas Day of all ! Never had poor Isabel felt her loneliness to be so utter—her friendlessness to be so complete. Not even the love of the handsome sportsman could console her; for his severance from her, just at the very instant when she had first awakened to the consciousness of that sentiment, now filled her with despair.

Then, as she sat in the schoolroom on that Christmas evening, purposely shunning the society of Miss Bidwell and the teachers in the parlour—as she sat there, in that cheerless place, with the cold moon looking in upon her through the window, and the trees outside stretching their skeleton branches all white with snow, she thought how different her lot was from that of all her fellow-pupils, who had gone to their happy and joyous homes a fortnight ago. And her fancy, feverishly busy, pictured to itself the scenes that were taking place at those homes; and as memory carried her back to the period of her own girlhood in the lifetime of her parents, she beheld an array of Christmas amusements, gaieties, and festivities pass before her mental vision. There were merry children gathered round a table, playing at cards or snap-dragon – there were

others running hither and thither in the delights of blindman's buff. There were dances and games beneath the mistletoe, and so many pleasures and enjoyments that the longer she thus mentally looked upon them, the more poignant and intolerable became the contrast which her own lorn and desolate condition presented.

Blinding tears rained down her cheeks – her brain reeled – her senses seemed abandoning her, until she became aware that she was now no longer alone. A pair of arms were thrown round her neck, tears were mingling with her tears – and a gentle voice was whispering soothingly in her ears. Need we say that it was the good-hearted little French governess who was thus endeavouring to console our heroine? And Isabel, whose pride rendered her ashamed of displaying her weakness even to the gaze of such sincere and honest friendship as this, dashed away her tears, smiled upon Mademoiselle Trictrac, pressed her hand warmly, and then hastened up to her own chamber.

Time passed on. The holidays arrived at a termination, the young ladies returned to school, and the routine of Miss Bidwell's establishment was resumed with as much precision as if it had never been interrupted. But if there were any change at all, it was that things grew worse for poor Isabel. Mr. Trafford – who, though rich, was capricious and neglectful – became more irregular than ever in making the necessary remittances to Miss Bidwell on his niece's behalf; and she, poor girl, was compelled to have recourse to many a shift to maintain a respectable appearance with regard to her toilet. The head-mistress grew more spiteful towards the friendless orphan: the English teachers failed not to follow their superior's example; and the young ladies generally were as cruel and heartless as schoolgirls can sometimes be towards an unpopular fellow pupil. Thus time passed on – month succeeded month – and as if nothing should be wanting to render poor Isabel's affliction complete, James Watson returned not. The good-hearted Mademoiselle Trictrac often wept at the evident futility of her well-meant endeavours to impart consolation to the soul of one whom she could not help looking upon as too young, too harmless, and too beautiful to be thus sorely tried.

The summer holidays came. There was another long interval of loneliness for Isabel Vere at the school, and vainly did she wander in the wood with the hope of at length hailing the reappearance of one whom she could not forget. But he came not; and deeper grew the melancholy in the heart of the maiden. The end of the vacation arrived; the girls returned to their seminary, and everything went on as before.

Weeks passed away, month succeeded month: the autumn went by, winter returned again. And again, too, came the breaking-up day; again did a troop of merry damsels leave for their happy homes; and once again was Isabel Vere left to the utter loneliness of her sad, lorn, neglected position. Still, with that pride which was an integral part of her character, she strove to bear up against all her various causes of sorrow—until an incident occurred which affected her almost to the breaking of her generous heart.

It was the day before Christmas Day – and Isabel, having taken a longer walk than usual, returned to the school after an absence of about three hours. As she entered the hall, she heard voices talking loudly in the adjacent parlour, the door of which stood half open.

‘I’m sure I don’t know what the world’s coming to !’ cried Miss Bidwell, in a tone of bitter contemptuousness.

‘The shame-faced minx !’ ejaculated Miss Troutbeck.

‘The impudent creature !’ chimed in Miss Pugh. ‘The wretched foreigner !’ contributed Miss Tank.

‘And to think, now,’ interposed the pompous tones of Dr. Blossom, ‘that I should have been deceived by such a smooth-faced hypocrite as Morton.’

‘Thank Heaven, we both know how to punish such immoral proceedings, my reverend friend,’ resumed Miss Bidwell. ‘I am sure I never shall regret having packed her off bag and baggage at only an instant’s warning – and I should advise her to apply to me for a character.’

‘As for myself, dear Madam,’ said Dr. Blossom, ‘I can lay my hand upon my heart, with a satisfied conscience at having dismissed Mr. Morton in the same summary manner. Indeed, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, I felt justified in refusing to listen to a word of vindication –’

‘That’s just the way I acted with the impudent Trictrac,’ cried Miss Bidwell. ‘I was not to be duped by her tragic acting – throwing herself on her knees – pretending to cry as if her heart would break – praying me not to ruin her ! Ruin her, indeed ! – a jade that walks out clandestinely with a young clergyman who puts his arm round her waist !’

Isabel Vere now comprehended it all. Her blood boiled in her veins: she was on the point of bursting into the apartment and denouncing the odious act of tyranny which had been perpetrated, when she suddenly recollected how utterly powerless she was to remedy or avenge it, and her pride prevented her from giving way to useless invectives and in effectual upbraidings. Feeling more keenly than ever the misery of her own position, and pressing her hand to her throbbing bosom, she sped up to her chamber, which she kept for the remainder of that day on the plea of indisposition.

The morning of Christmas Day dawned after an almost sleepless night for Isabel Vere. She had nearly concluded her toilet, when a chaise (evidently from the railway-station) drove up to the front of the seminary; and as Isabel glanced carelessly through her window, she saw an elderly gentleman, dressed in black, alight. She thought no more of the incident – she had other matters to occupy her mind; but presently, at the expiration of about a quarter of an hour, she heard the front garden gate open-and glancing forth again, she beheld Dr. Blossom advancing with unusual

speed towards the house. In three or four minutes there was a gentle tap at her door; and one of the maid-servants requested Miss Vere's immediate presence in the parlour. Wondering what it could mean, our heroine proceeded thither; and the moment she crossed the threshold, Miss Bidwell hastened to seize her by the hand and present her to the elderly gentleman in black, saying in a voice of most marvellous blandness, 'This is the dear girl whom I have so loved and cherished for seven blessed years.'

'The universal favourite !' cried Miss Troutbeck.

'Everybody loved her !' chimed in Miss Pugh.

'Nay, adored her !' added Miss Tank.

'I am sure,' said Dr. Blossom, who, hat in hand, now made the most obsequious bows, 'we all felt the greatest interest in her ladyship –'

'Permit me, reverend Sir,' interrupted the gentleman in black, who had a mild voice and a benevolent look, 'to introduce myself to her ladyship –'

'Let *me* introduce you,' said Miss Bidwell. 'My lady, permit me to present to your ladyship Mr Longhurst, solicitor of London, who has travelled all night by the train to bring your ladyship certain tidings of importance.'

Isabel looked around in bewilderment: it appeared to her as if she were in the midst of a dream. That altered manner towards her – those titles by which she was addressed – the tidings that awaited her – what could it all mean ?

'My lady,' said Mr. Longhurst, taking her by the hand with a paternal air, 'the announcement which I have to make requires little preface; for it would be a miserable affectation to pretend that it is needful to prepare you to hear of the death of one of whom you have seen so little. In a word, therefore, an accident while hunting the day before yesterday, proved fatal to your cousin the Marquis of Somerton – and you, my lady – you are now Countess of Melcombe.'

'Yes – a Countess in your own right, my sweet young friend,' said Miss Bidwell.

'With a splendid estate,' cried Miss Troutbeck.

'A noble mansion,' chimed in Miss Pugh.

'Eleven thousand a year,' added Miss Tank.

'And five livings in your ladyship's gift,' observed Dr. Blossom, bowing almost down to the floor.

A momentary faintness came over Isabel: for an instant she seemed to be staggering towards a seat; but suddenly regaining all her self-possession, she said inquiringly, ‘And therefore my cousin, Mr. Francis Portland, is now Marquis of Somerton?’

‘Exactly so,’ replied Mr. Longhurst: ‘the Marquisate with the Somerton estates go to the heir male – the Melcombe title and property revert to the female line. Your ladyship's cousin will be here almost directly – he accompanied me from London – but he wished the intelligence to be broken first to your ladyship.’

‘Now at least,’ said Isabel, ‘he will have an opportunity of settling down into a quiet life and retrieving his character.’

‘Retrieving his character!’ ejaculated Mr. Longhurst. ‘Why, there is not a more honourable man in existence than Frank Portland, as he *was* – Marquis of Somerton as he *is*. Do you know what he did? I am his lawyer, and I can tell you. He inherited the entailed estate, it is true: but his father left him a heritage of debts, some of which had not been contracted in the most honourable manner and would not bear exposure to the light of day. Frank was resolved to save his parent's memory from shame and obloquy; he took all those debts upon himself – he shut up the mansion in order to get rid of the expense of maintaining an establishment there. He has lived upon a pittance on the Continent in order that the bulk of his revenues might be devoted to the noblest of purposes. And yet calumny, as I perceive, has dared assail this excellent young man!’

Dr. Blossom and Miss Bidwell looked confused, and quailed beneath the indignant glance which Isabel bent upon them.

‘But it is no wonder that evil tongues should have thus maligned him,’ proceeded Mr. Longhurst, ‘when even the very creditors themselves whom he undertook to pay have exhibited the most unexampled greediness, and actually put the law in force against him when through a depreciation of the revenues of the estate there was a falling off in the amount of the annual instalment. – But, ah! here he comes.’

This ejaculation was uttered as a loud knock at the front door resounded through the house; and during the brief interval which occurred ere the domestic answered the summons, Isabel said to herself, ‘Now for the first time I shall see my cousin Frank Portland.’

The parlour door opened; and as the new-comer made his appearance upon the threshold, a cry of astonishment and joy burst from the lips of Isabel, as she sprang forward exclaiming, ‘What, James: – Mr. Watson – is it you?’

‘No longer James Watson, dearest girl,’ replied her lover, ‘but Frank Portland, who has come to ask if the Countess of Melcombe will consent to become Marchioness of Somerton?’

Mr. Longhurst, who was in the secret of his noble client's affection for Isabel, thought that the best thing which could now be done was to leave the lovers alone together; and he therefore he hurried Dr. Blossom, Miss Bidwell, and her teachers away from the parlour.

'And so you have returned at last,' murmured Isabel, when, clasped in her lover's arms, her head rested upon his shoulder. 'If I were not so happy now, I might scold you for having deserted me so abruptly a year ago.'

'What could I do, dearest? The bailiffs, set on by the hungry and remorseless creditors, were upon my track – I could not tell you this – I could not explain to you how for the first time since I had shut up the mansion, I was then paying it a stealthy visit –'

'Yes – you might have told me all,' interrupted Isabel, 'if you had only confessed that you were Frank Portland, with noble connections – instead of plain and simple James Watson.'

'Ah!' ejaculated the marquis, smiling; 'there's where the point lies. Conceive my astonishment when I found by your discourse at our first meeting, that you were my cousin Isabel Vere. I loved you – —yes, I loved you at first sight; but methought that you had in your disposition one failing – that of the pride of birth. Then I was determined to put you to the test, and I assumed the false name which shocked your aristocratic ears. Afterwards, when I had reason to believe that you loved me, I might have revealed the truth; but then came the sickening reflection that I was but a pauper – that I had not even a home to offer you –'

'Enough, enough, Frank!' interrupted Isabel, in a voice of emotion, as she bent her beautiful eyes upon her lover, while he sat upon an ottoman at her feet, clasping her hand in his own.

'One word more,' said the Marquis of Somerton. 'Often during the year which has just passed, have I thought of writing to you, or of returning at any risk into this neighbourhood; but the consideration which I have just named prevented me –'

'No more – no more, dear Frank!' cried Isabel. 'At all events we are happy now! And, oh! how different is this Christmas Day from the last!'

Within half an hour after this conversation, the marquis and the countess – (oh, what a handsome pair of lovers!) – might be seen walking arm-in-arm through the village, making inquiries at several houses. At length they reached one where their query received an affirmative response; and in a small back room poor Mademoiselle Trictrac was found, absorbed in tears. Isabel caught her in her arms, told her of all her good fortune, and soon succeeded in pouring a flood of joy into the little Frenchwoman's heart. She knew where the curate was to be found. Lord Somerton at once sought him out; and as he avowed a sincere and honourable affection for Mademoiselle Trictrac, he had every reason to be contented with the promises which the marquis made him.

To the astonishment and joy of Miss Bidwell, the Countess of Melcombe signified her intention of remaining at the establishment, until a decent interval should have elapsed from her cousin's death, and she might accompany the Marquis of Somerton to the altar. She seemed to take no notice of the grovelling subserviency which was now displayed towards her; and when at the expiration of the holidays the girls came back to school, she behaved to them with as much kindness and affability as if they had never treated her otherwise than with the cringing respect and nauseating adulation which they now showed towards her.

She was married from the school when the spring-time came; and she selected six of the eldest young ladies to be her bridesmaids. She allowed Miss Bidwell to provide the wedding breakfast, and Dr. Blossom to perform the marriage ceremony. But she had also expressed her wish that he should on the same occasion tie the nuptial knot on behalf of the Rev. Edward Morton and Mademoiselle Trictrac. This was the only revenge which she took against the Rector for all the slights and impertinences she had received at his hands.

As for Miss Bidwell, her teachers and her pupils, the revenge which she took against them was accomplished by keeping before their eyes for three long months the spectacle of her happiness, and making them bend down to her good fortune – they who had helped to cause so much of the past sorrows which she had endured ! The Hon. Mr. Trafford was confined to his bed by illness at the time of this marriage; and he soon afterwards died, leaving his niece all his fortune now that she needed it not ! The Marquis of Somerton bestowed a living of twelve hundred a year upon the Rev. Edward Morton, who is as happy with his French wife as the marquis himself is with his beautiful and accomplished Isabel. Dr. Blossom, having unfortunately speculated in Welsh mining shares and become embarrassed, had his living sequestrated; and the last intelligence that we received of him was through the medium of a clerical journal, which stated that he had accepted the post of curate to the Rev. Edward Morton. Only one more character of our tale remains to be noticed; and this matter can be very quickly disposed of by a quotation from a recent *Gazette*, under the heading of INSOLVENTS, where we observed the name of ‘Sarah Bidwell, schoolmistress, Devonshire.’