# 1886-06 — A Drama in Muslin — Book 3 Chapter 5

London: Vizetelly & Co., 1 June 1886, pages 281-296, 6,617 words

CHAPTER V.

About ten o’clock on the night of Olive's elopement, Alice knocked tremblingly at her mother’s door.

“Mother,” she said, “Olive is not in her room, nor yet in the house; I have looked for her everywhere.”

"She is downstairs with her father in the studio,” said Mrs. Barton; and, signing to her daughter to be silent, she led her out of hearing of Barnes, who was folding and putting some dresses away in the wardrobe.

"I have been down to the studio,” Alice replied in a whisper.

"Then I am afraid she has run away with Captain Hibbert. But we shall gain nothing by sending men out with lanterns and making a fuss; by this time she is well on her way to Dublin. She might have done better than Captain Hibbert, but she might also have done worse. She will write to us in a few days to tell us that she is married, and to beg of us to forgive her.”

And that night Mrs. Barton slept even more happily, with her mind more completely at rest, than usual; whereas Alice, fevered with doubt and apprehension, lay awake. At seven o’clock she was at her window, watching the grey morning splinter into sunlight over the quiet fields. But suddenly all vaporous thoughts of Olive and her lover were crushed into silence, and, paralysed with fear, Alice watched the gamekeeper coming towards the house with a woman in his arms. The suspicion that her sister might have been killed in an agrarian outrage gripped her heart like an iron hand. She ran downstairs, and, rushing across the gravel, opened the wicket-gate. Olive was moaning with pain, but her moans were a sweet reassurance in Alice’s ears, and without attempting to understand the man’s story of how Miss Olive had sprained her ankle in crossing the stile in their wood, and how he had found her as he was going his rounds, she gave the man five shillings, thanked him, and sent him away. Barnes and the butler then carried Olive upstairs, and in the midst of much confusion Mr. Barton rode down the avenue in quest of Dr. Reed — galloped down the avenue, his pale hair blowing in the breeze.

"I wish you had come straight to me,” said Mrs. Barton to Alice, as soon as Barnes had left the room. "We’d have got her upstairs between us, and then we might have told any story we liked about her illness.”

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"But the Lawlers' gamekeeper would know all about it."

"Ah, yes, that's true. I never heard of anything so unfortunate in my life. An elopement is never very respectable, but an elopement that does not succeed, when the girl comes home again is just as bad as.... I cannot think how Olive could have managed to meet Captain Hibbert and arrange all this business, without my finding it out. I feel sure she must have had the assistance of a third party. I feel certain that all this is Barnes' doing. I am beginning to hate that woman, with her perpetual smile, but it won't do to send her away now; we must wait." And on these words Mrs. Barton approached the bed.

Shaken with sudden fits of shivering, and her teeth chattering, Olive lay staring blindly at her mother and sister. Her eyes were expressive at once of fear and pain.

"And now, my own darling, will you tell me how all this happened?"

"Oh, not now, mother, not now... I don't know; I couldn't help it.... You mustn't scold me, I feel too ill to bear it."

"I am not thinking of scolding you, dearest, and you need not tell me anything you do not like.... I know you were going to run away with Captain Hibbert, and met with an accident crossing the stile in the Lawler Wood."

"Oh, yes, yes; I met that horrid woman, Mrs. Lawler; she knew all about it, and was waiting for me at the stile. She said lots of dreadful things to me… I don't remember what; that she had more right to Edward than I..."

"Never mind, dear; don't agitate yourself thinking of what she said...."

"And then, as I tried to pass her, she pushed me and I fell, and hurt my ankle so badly that I could not get up; and she taunted me, and she said she could not help me home because we were not on visiting terms. And I lay in that dreadful wood all night. But I can't speak any more, I feel too ill; and I never wish to see Edward again.... the pain of my ankle is something terrible."

Mrs. Barton looked at Alice expressively, and she whispered in her ear:

"This is all Barnes' doing, but we cannot send her away... We must put a bold face on it, and brave it out."

Dr. Reed was announced.

"Oh, how do you do, doctor?.... It was so good of you to come at once.... We were afraid Mr. Barton would not find you at home. I am afraid that Olive has sprained her foot badly. Last night she went out for a walk rather late in the evening, and, in endeavouring to cross a stile, she

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slipped and hurt herself so badly that she was unable to return home, and lay exposed for several hours to the heavy night dews. I am afraid she has caught a severe cold.... She has been shivering....”

"Can I see her foot?”

"Certainly. Olive, dear, will you allow Dr. Reed to see your ankle?”

"Oh, take care, mamma; you are hurting me!” shrieked the girl, as Mrs. Barton removed the bedclothes. At this moment a knock was heard at the door.

"Who on earth is this?” cried Mrs. Barton. "Alice, will you go and see? Say that I am engaged, and can attend to nothing now.”

When Alice returned to the bedside she drew her mother imperatively towards the window. "Captain Hibbert is waiting in the drawing-room. He says he must see you. ,

At the mention of Captain Hibbert’s name Mrs. Barton’s admirably-governed temper showed signs of yielding: her face contracted and she bit her lips.

“You must go down and see him. Tell him that Olive is very ill and that the doctor is with her. And mind you, you must not answer any questions. Say that I cannot see him, but that I am greatly surprised at his forcing his way into my house after what has passed between us; that I hope he will never intrude himself upon us again; that I cannot have my daughter’s life endangered, and that, if he insists on persecuting us, I shall have to write to his Colonel.

"Do you not think that father would be the person to make such explanations?”

"You know your father could not be trusted to talk sensibly for five minutes — at least,” she said, correcting herself, "on anything that did not concern painting or singing... But,” she continued, following her daughter to the door, "on second thoughts I do not think it would be advisable to bring matters to a crisis . I do not know how this affair will affect Olive’s chances, and if he is anxious to marry her I do not see why he should not... she may not be able to get any better. So you had better, I think, put him off — pretend that we are very angry, and get him to promise not to try to see or to write to Olive until, let us say, the end of the year. It will only make him more keen on her.”

When Alice opened the drawing-room door Captain Hibbert rushed forward; his soft eyes were bright with excitement, and his tall figure was thrown into a beautiful pose when he stopped.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Barton. I had expected your sister.”

"My sister is very ill in bed, and the doctor is with her.”

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"Ill in bed!”

"Yes, she sprained her ankle last night in attempting to cross the stile in the wood at the end of our lawn.”

"Oh, that was the reason... then... Can I see your sister for a few minutes?”

"It is quite impossible; and my mother desires me to say that she is very surprised that you should come here….. We know all about your attempt to induce Olive to leave her home.”

"Then she has told you? But if you knew how I love her you would not blame me. What else could I do? Your mother would not let me see her, and she was very unhappy at home; you did not know this, but I did, and if luck hadn’t been against me.... Ah! but what’s the use in talking of luck; luck was against me, or she would have been my wife now. And what a little thing suffices to blight a man’s happiness in life; what a little, oh, what a little!” he said, speaking in a voice full of bitterness, and he buried his face in his hands.

Alice’s eyes as she looked at him were expressive of her thoughts — they beamed at once with pity and admiration. He was but the ordinary handsome young man that in England nature seems to reproduce in everlasting stereotype. Long graceful legs, clad in tight-fitting trousers, slender hips rising architecturally to square wide shoulders, a thin strong neck and a tiny head — yes, a head so small that an artist would at once mark off eight on his sheet of double elephant. And now he lay over the back of a chair weeping like a child, in the intensity of his grief he was no longer commonplace, and as Alice looked at this superb animal thrown back in a superb abandonment of pose, her heart filled with the natural pity that the female feels always for the male in distress, and the impulse within her was to put her arms about him and console him; and then she understood her sister’s passion for him, and her mind formulated it thus: "How handsome he is! Any girl would like a man like that.” And as Alice surrendered herself to those sensuous, or rather romantic feelings, her nature quickened to a sense of pleasure, and she grew gentler with him, and was glad to listen while he sobbed out his sorrows to her.

“Oh, why!” he exclaimed, "did she fall over that thrice- accursed stile! In five minutes more we would have been locked in each other’s arms, and for ever. I had a couple of the best post-horses in Gort; they’d have taken us to Athenry in a couple of hours, and then... Oh! what luck, what luck!” . .

"But do you not know that Olive met Mrs. Lawler in the wood, and that it was she who...”

“What do you say?... You don’t mean to tell me that it was Mrs. Lawler who prevented Olive from meeting me?” Then grinding his teeth he said, "Oh! the vileness and the baseness! So she dared do that, the beastly creature!” and, looking a tower of athletic grace, he raised his arms, as if he would crush his enemy into the earth.

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"Oh, what beasts, what devils women are," he said; "and the worst of it is that one cannot be even with them, and they know it.... If you only knew," he said, turning almost fiercely upon Alice, "how I loved your sister, you would pity me; but I suppose it is all over now. Is she very ill?"

"We don't know yet. She has sprained her ankle very badly, and is shivering terribly; she was lying out all night in the wet wood."

He did not answer at once. He walked once or twice up and down the room, and then he said, taking Alice's hand in his, "Will you be a friend to me, Miss Barton?" He could get no further, for tears were rolling down his cheeks.

Alice looked at him tenderly; she was much touched by the manifestation of his love, and at the end of a long silence she said —

"Now, Captain Hibbert, I want you to listen to me. Don't cry any more, but listen."

"I daresay I look a great fool."

"No, indeed you do not," she answered; and then in kindly-worded phrases she told him that, at least for the present, he must not attempt to correspond with Olive. "Give me your word of honour that you will neither write nor speak to her for, let us say, six months, and I will promise to be your friend."

"I will do anything you ask me to do, but will you in return promise to write and tell me how she is getting on, and if she is in any danger?"

"I think I can promise to do that; I will write and tell you how Olive is in a few days. Now we must say good-bye; and you will not forget your promise to me, as I shall not forget mine to you."

When Alice went upstairs, Dr. Reed and Mrs. Barton were talking on the landing.

"And what do you think, doctor?" asked the anxious mother.

"It is impossible to say. She has evidently received a severe nervous shock, and this and the exposure to which she was subjected may develop into something serious. You will give her that Dover's powder to-night, and you will see that she has absolute quiet and rest. Have you got a reliable nurse?"

"Yes, the young ladies have a maid; I think Barnes can be trusted to carry out your orders, doctor."

"Oh, mamma, I hope you will allow me to nurse my sister; I should not like to leave her in charge of a servant."

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"I am afraid you are not strong enough, dear."

"Oh, yes, I am; am I not strong enough, doctor?"

Dr. Reed looked for a moment steadily at Alice. "Your sister will," he said, "require a good deal of looking after. But if you will not overdo it I think you seem quite strong enough to nurse her. But you must not sit up at night with her too regularly; you must share the labour with someone."

"She will do that with me," said Mrs. Barton, speaking more kindly, Alice thought, than she had ever heard her speak before.

Then a wailing voice was heard calling to Alice.

"Go in and see what she wants, dear, but you will not encourage her to talk much; the doctor does not wish it."

The room did not look the same to Alice as it had ever looked before. Her eyes fell on the Persian rugs laid between the two white beds and the tall glass in the wardrobe where Olive wasted half-an-hour every evening, examining her beauty. Would she ever do so again? Now a broken reflection of feverish eyes and blonde hair was what remained. The white curtains of the chimneypiece had been drawn aside, a bright fire was burning, and Barnes was removing a foot-pan of hot water.

"Sit down here by me, Alice; I want to talk to you."

"The doctor has forbidden you to talk, dear; he says you must have perfect rest and quiet."
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"I must talk a little to you; if I didn't I should go mad."

"Well, what is it dear?"

"I will tell you presently," said the sick girl, glancing at Barnes.

"You can tidy up the room afterwards, Barnes; Miss Olive wants to talk to me now."

"Oh, Alice, tell me," cried the girl when the servant had left the room, "I don't want to ask mamma — she won't tell me the exact truth; but you will. Tell me what the doctor said... did he say I was going to die?" .

"Going to die? Olive, who ever heard of such a thing? You really must not give way to such fancies."

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"Well, tell me what he said."

"He said that you had received a severe nervous shock, that you had been subjected to several hours' exposure, that you must take great care of yourself, and, above all, have perfect rest and quiet, and not excite yourself and not talk."

"Is that all he said? Then he cannot know how ill I feel; perhaps I ought to see another doctor. But I don t believe anyone could do me much good. Oh, I feel wretchedly ill, and somehow I seem to know I am going to die! It would be very horrible to die: but young girls no older than I have died — have been cut off in the beginning of their life. And we have seen nothing of life, only a few balls and parties. It would be terrible to die so soon. When Violet carried off the marquis I felt so bitterly ashamed that I thought I would have liked to die; but not now — now I know that Edward loves me I would not care to die; it would be terrible to die before I was married. Wouldn't it, Alice? …… But you don't answer me; did you never think about death?"

Then, as the thin wailing voice sank into her ears, Alice started from her dreams, and she strove to submit her attention to her sister.

"Yes, dear, of course I have. Death is, no doubt, a very terrible thing, but we can do no good by thinking of it."

"Oh yes, we should, Alice, for this is not the only world — there is another and a better one; and, as mamma says, and as religion says, we are only here to try and get a good place in it. You are surprised to hear me speak like this; you think I never think of anything but the colour of a bonnet-string, but I do."

"I am sure you do, Olive; I never doubted it; but I wish you would now do what the doctor orders, and refrain from talking and exciting yourself, and try and get well. You may then think of death and other gloomy things as much as you like."

"You don't understand, Alice; one can't think of death then — one has so much else to think of; one is so taken up with other ideas. It is only when one is ill that one really begins to see what life is. You have never been ill, and you don't know how terribly near death seems to have come — very near. Perhaps I ought to see the priest; it would be just as well, just in case I should die. Don't you think so?"

"I don't think there is any more danger of your dying now than there was a month ago, dear, and I am sure you can have nothing on your mind that demands immediate confession," she said, her voice trembling a little.

"Oh yes, I have, Alice, and a very great deal; I have been very wicked."

"Very wicked!"

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"Well, I know you aren't pious, Alice, and perhaps you don't believe there is harm in such things, but I do; and I know it was very wrong, and perhaps a mortal sin, to try to run away with Edward."

Alice drew a long breath.

"But I loved him so very dearly, and I was so tired of staying at home and being taken out to parties; and then everything seemed to be going wrong. For, although I was the belle of the season, I did not get as many offers of marriage as I expected. Edward was, after all, the only one who proposed to me, and I was afraid of remaining an old maid; and when you are in love with a man you forget everything,... at least I did; and when he asked to kiss me I couldn't refuse. You will not tell anyone, Alice dear, that I told you this." Alice shook her head, and Olive continued, in spite of all that the doctor had said.

"But you don't know how lonely I feel at home; you never feel lonely, I daresay, for you only think of your books and papers, and don't realise what a disgrace it would be if I didn't marry, and after all the trouble that mamma has taken… but I don't know what will become of me now. I am going to be dreadfully ill, and when I get well I shall be pretty no longer; I am sure I am looking wretchedly; I must see myself — fetch the glass, Alice, Alice."

All that day and night Alice remained in the sickroom. Towards morning she lay down; but every five minutes she was disturbed: suffering from intense nervousness, Olive lay whining and calling incessantly to her. And when Barnes came and suddenly raised the blinds there were shrieks of pain; and the room had to be kept darkened. Dr. Reed said that at present he could not speak with any certainty, but he ordered several inches of the pale silky hair to be cut away and a cold lotion to be applied to the forehead, and some sliced lemons were given to her to suck. She was obviously very ill. The clear blue eyes were dull, the breathing quick, the skin dry and hot; and on the following day four leeches had to be applied to her ankle. They relieved her somewhat, and, when she had taken her draught, she sank to sleep. But as the night grew denser and the silence of the house was tomb-like, Alice, who was dozing, was suddenly awakened by someone speaking wildly in her ear. Olive was delirious. Fancying herself with Edward, she cried, "Oh, take me away, dear! I am sick of home; I want to get away from all these spiteful girls... I know they are laughing at me because Violet cut me out with the marquis. We shall be married, shan't we, the moment we arrive in Dublin? It is horrible to be married at the registrar's, but it is better than not being married at all... But do you think they will catch us up? It would be dreadful to be taken back home, I could not bear it.... Oh, do drive on; we don't seem to be moving… You see that strange tree on the right, we have not passed it yet; I don't think we ever shall. Whip up that bay horse; don't you see that he is turning round, that he wants to go back? And I am sure that this is not the road; that man at the corner told you a lie. I know he was mocking at us — I saw it in his eye.... Look, look, Edward! Oh, look — it is papa, or Lord Dungory, I can't tell which, he will not lift his cloak." ...Then the vision would fade from her delirious brain, and she would fancy herself in the wood, arguing once again with Mrs. Lawler. "No, what you say is not true; he never loved you; how could he? You arc an old woman.... Let me pass — let me pass.... "Why do you speak to me? We don't visit, we never did visit you. No;

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it was not at our house you met Edward.... You are a bad woman; and Edward shall not, he could not, think of running away with you — will you, darling? Oh! help me, help me out of this dreadful wood. I want to go home, but I cannot walk... and that terrible bird is still watching me, and I dare not pass that tree until you drive it away."

Now only the two beds, with their white curtains and brass crowns, loomed through the pale obscurity, broken only by the red-glowing basin where a nightlight burnt, and the long tongues of flame that the blazing peat scattered from time to time across the darkened ceiling. The solitude of the sleeping house grew momentarily more intense in Alice's brain, and she trembled as she strove to soothe her sister, and covered the hot feverish arms over with the bedclothes. But gradually the lonely hours wore themselves away, and the morning broke with all its welcome sounds of fluttering wings, and footfalls in the echoing corridors.

About eight o'clock Mrs. Barton came in. "What sort of night has Olive had?" she asked anxiously.

"Not a very quiet one; I am afraid she was a little delirious."

"Dr. Reed promised to be here early. How do you feel, dear?" Mrs. Barton asked, leaning over the bed.

"Oh, very ill; I can scarcely breathe, and I have such a pain in my side."

"Your lips look very sore, dear; do they hurt you?" — Olive only moaned dismally — and, looking anxiously at her elder daughter, she said:

"And you, too, Alice, you are not looking well; you are looking very tired. You must not sit up another night with your sister. To-night I will take your place."

"Oh, mother, no! I assure you it is a pleasure to me to nurse Olive. I am very well indeed; do not think about me."

"Indeed, I will think about you, and you must do as I tell you. I will look after Olive, and you must try and get a good night's rest. We will take it in turns to nurse her. And now come down to breakfast; a cup of hot coffee will do you all the good in the world. Barnes, you will not think of leaving Miss Olive until we come back; and, if any change occurs, ring for me immediately."

When Dr. Reed arrived, Alice was again sitting by the bedside. She rose to meet him. She noticed that he looked at her intently, but all was forgotten in the question:

"And how is our patient to-day?"

"I cannot say she is any better; she has a distressing cough, and last night I am afraid she was a little delirious."

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"Ah, you say the cough is very distressing?”

“I am afraid I must call it distressing; is that a very bad sign?”

"Probably there is not much wrong, but it would be better to ascertain the condition of the patient, and then we may be able to do something to relieve her.”

They approach the bed. The doctor draws a stethoscope from his pocket. From either side they aid each other, and they lift the patient into a sitting position.

"I should like to examine her chest,” said the doctor, and his fingers moved to unfasten her chemise. Olive looked at him at once timidly and suspiciously.

"Don’t expose me,” she murmured feebly, and, notwithstanding her condition, she blushed to the roots of her flaxen hair.

“Now, Olive dear, remember it is only the doctor; let him examine you.”

It was with difficulty Alice said the words. She felt her position sharply, but she mastered her sense of false shame and then forgot it in the keen sensations of pity which the sight of the poor sick beauty inspired.

The eyes were now but dull filmy blue, the lips were covered with sores, and there was a circumscribed redness over the cheekbones — not the hectic flush of phthisis, but the dusky red that is characteristic of pneumonia. And so weak was the patient that during the stethoscopic examination Alice had to support her; her head fell from side to side as she was moved, and when the doctor pressed her right side her moans were pregnant with pain.

"Now let me see the tongue.... Dry and parched.”

"Shall I die, doctor? ” the girl asked feebly and plaintively as she sank amidst the pillows.

"Die! no, not if you take care of yourself and do what you are told.”

"But tell me, Dr. Reed.... you can tell me the truth. Is Olive dangerously ill, is her life in danger?” Alice asked anxiously as they moved away from the bed towards the window, towards Alice’s worktable.

"She will get well if she takes care of herself; she is suffering from an acute attack of pneumonia.”

"What is that?”

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"Congestion of the lungs, or rather an advanced stage of it. It is more common in men than in women, and it is the consequence of long exposure to wet and cold."

“Is it very dangerous?”

"No, not if the patient is taken great care of; and now let me tell you that it is all-important that the temperature of the room should not be allowed to vary. I attended a case of it some three or four miles from here, but the damp of the cabin was so great that it was impossible to combat the disease. The cottage, or rather hovel, was built on the edge of a soft spongy bog, and so wet was it that the woman had to sweep the water every morning from the floor where it collected in great pools. The poverty that these peasants endure is something shocking. I am now going to visit an evicted family, who are living in a partially-roofed shed fenced up by the roadside. There, in the most sheltered corner, the father, down with fever, lies shivering, with nothing to drink but cold water, nothing to eat but a potato. The wife told me that last week it rained so heavily that she had to get up three times in the night to wring the sheets out."

"And why were they evicted?"

"Oh, that is a long story; but it is a singularly characteristic one. In the first place he was an idle fellow; he got into difficulties and owed his landlord three years' rent. Then he got into bad hands, and was prevented from coming to terms with his landlord. Mr. Scully, who is the agent, did his best to come to terms, but there was a lot of jobbing going on between the priest and the village grocer. It was arranged that the latter should pay off the existing debt if the landlord could be forced into letting him the farm at a 'fair rent,' that is to say, thirty per cent, reduction on the old rent. Then, in recognition of his protecting influence, the priest was to take a third of the farm off the grocer's hands, and the two were then to conjointly rack-rent poor Murphy for the remaining third portion, which he would be allowed to retain for a third of the original rent; but the National League heard of their little tricks, and now the farm is boycotted, and Murphy is dying in the ditch for the good of his *counthry*."

"I thought boycotting was ended, that the League had lost all power."

"It has and it hasn't. Sometimes a man takes a farm and keeps it in defiance of his neighbours; sometimes they hunt him out of it. It is hard to come to a conclusion, for when in one district you hear of rents being paid and boycotted farms letting freely, in another, only a few miles away, the landlords are giving reductions, and there are farms lying waste, that no one dare look at. In my opinion the fire is only smouldering, and when the Coercion Act expires the old organisation will rise up as strong and as triumphant as before. This is a time of respite for both parties."

The conversation then came to a sudden pause. Alice felt it would be out of place for her to speak her sympathies for the Nationalistic cause, and she knew it would be unfair to lead the doctor to express his. So at the end of a long silence, during which each divined the other's thoughts, she said:

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"I suppose you see a great deal of the poor and the miseries they endure?”

"I have had good opportunities of studying them. Before I came here I spent ten years in the poorest district in Donegal. I am sure there wasn’t a gentleman’s house within fifteen miles of me.”

"And did you not often feel very lonely?”

"Yes, I did, but one gets so used to solitude that to return to the world, after having lived long in the atmosphere of one’s own thoughts, can only be achieved by violent and most painful victories over oneself. I cannot tell you how distracting and wearying I found society when I first came to live at Gort. The repugnance that grows on those who live alone to hearing their fellow-creatures express their ideas is very strange. It must be felt to be understood; and it is curious I have never seen the sentiment, I may call it a situation, dealt with in fiction.”

"Do you ever read fiction?”

"Yes, and enjoy it. I cannot tell you how, in my little home amid the northern bogs, I used to look forward when I had finished •writing, to spending an hour before going to bed with a volume of Thackeray or George Eliot.”

"What were you writing?”

"A book.”

“A book I” exclaimed Alice, looking suddenly pleased and astonished.

"Yes, but not a work of fiction — I am afraid I am too prosaic an individual for that — a medical work.”

"And have you finished your book?”

"Yes, it is finished, and I am glad to say it is in the hands of a London publisher. We have not yet agreed about the price, but I hope and believe that, directly and indirectly, it will lead to putting me into a small London practice.”

"And then you will leave us?”

"I am afraid so. There are many friends I shall miss — that I shall be very sorry to leave, but...”

"Oh, of course it would not do to miss such a chance.”

When the doctor left, Alice proceeded to carry out his instructions concerning the patient, and, these being done, she sat down by the bedside and continued her thoughts of him with a sense

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of pleasure. She remembered that she had always liked him. Yes, it was a liking that dated as far back as the spinster's' ball at Ballinasloe. He was the only man there in whom she had taken the slightest interest. They were sitting together on the stairs when that poor fellow was thrown down and had his leg broken. She remembered how she had enjoyed meeting him at tennis-parties, and how often she had walked away with him from the players through the shrubberies; and above all she could not forget — it was a long sweet souvenir — the beautiful afternoon she had spent with him, sitting on the rock, the day of the picnic at Kinvarra Castle. It all seemed very strange to her, she was a little perplexed, and was only conscious of her happiness as one lying in the sun is of the pleasant blowing of the south wind. With the coming of her breath her bosom heaved, and as her dreams floated delicately before her, she thought of the doctor's eyes. They were grey, and her memory seemed filled with their bright quick glances. The rest of his face was a little vague to her. She had forgotten, or rather she had never thoroughly understood, that he was a short, thick-set, middle-aged man, that he wore mutton-chop whiskers and that his lips were overhung by a long dark moustache. His manners were those of an unpolished and somewhat commonplace man. But while she thought of his grey eyes her heart was thrilled with gladness, and as she dreamed of his lonely life of labour and his ultimate hopes of success, all her old sorrows and fears seemed to have evaporated, to have departed like chilly mists. Then suddenly and with the unexpectedness of an apparition the question presented itself, did she like him better than Harding? Alice shrank from the unpleasantness of the thought, nor did she force herself to answer it; but perhaps to escape from it, and there was a touch of cowardice in the acts, she busied herself with attending to her sister's wants.

And while Alice was thus happy, Olive lay suffering in all the dire humility of the flesh. Hourly her breathing grew shorter and more hurried, her cough more frequent, and the expectoration that accompanied it darker and thicker in colour. The beautiful eyes were now turgid and dull, the lids hung heavily over a line of filmy blue, and a thick scaly layer of bloody tenacious mucus persistently accumulated and covered the tiny and once almost jewel-like teeth. For three or four days these symptoms knew no abatement; and it was over this prostrated body, weakened and humiliated by illness, that Alice and Dr. Reed read love in each other's eyes, and it was about this poor flesh that their hands were joined as they lifted Olive out of the recumbent position she had slipped into, and built up the bowed-in pillows. And as it had once been all Olive in Brookfield, it was now all Alice; the veil seemed suddenly to have slipped from all eyes, and the exceeding worth of this plain girl was at last recognised. Nowhere could her place be supplied. Mrs. Barton's presence at the bedside did not soothe the sufferer; she grew restless and demanded her sister. Dr. Reed took heed of the devotion and care that was ministered with such loving hands in the sickroom and when not attending the patient he and this straight-souled girl, so wide in her sympathies, so deep in her love of natural things, would often withdraw to the window-recess, and for long half-hours stand talking there, looking at each other from time to time with quick, with meditative, with interested eyes. Each conversation began thus: —

"And do you think my sister is better to-day?"

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"I am afraid she will not begin to show signs of any real improvement until the ninth day. The malady must take its course."

"Still I do not think she suffers so much as she did yesterday; I am sure her ankle is not so painful: the bran-poultices have relieved her of much pain."

"I know nothing better for a sprain than a bran-poultice."

Then they would speak of indifferent things — of their friends, of the state of the country, of the Land Bill, of Mr. Barton's pictures. But, yielding to their emotion, they soon spoke of what was uppermost in their minds — of the MSS. on the table, of the London publisher. And the doctor, who had latterly developed a taste for fiction, seemed to be always either borrowing or returning a volume of Charlotte Brontë: and in talking of the rights and wrongs of Rochester's love for Jane, and Maggie Tulliver's for Stephen, the lovers revealed to each other their present state of soul. One day Olive, who was getting better, turned herself painfully in bed and watched the group by the window — watched Alice's tall, thin, pre-Raphaelite figure, so characteristic of her spiritual and intense self, and the doctor's bluff shoulders and square weather-beaten face, so characteristic of his nature, that would have been common-place were.it not for its determination. Both were seen in profile against the window. Their lips moved as Holbein's lips seem to move. Dr. Reed's fat Holbein hand was laid on the table; and the sick girl faded amid the white sheets like a white rose in the snow, while her sick blue eyes stared fadingly, in all the dim unreality of a drawing by Westall.

When the doctor went, when the sisters were alone Olive said: .

"Alice, do you like Dr. Reed? Would you marry him?

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