CHAPTER [a]X.

'Fairacre, 3rd February.

'THANK you for your kind inquiries after my chickens. They thrive apace. Ten out of twelve of them seem to have gained a firm footing in the world. One especially, a buffy white, nimble creature, is so trenchant a warrior in the battle of life that we have named it Hector,[1] not after the family, but the classical hero. He picks crumbs out of his brothers' mouths as if he were a Christian merchant; he hops on his mother's back, and, stretching his neck, spoils twenty muscatel grapes in half a minute. He snatches happy insects out of the sunshine, and, with one slight arch of his neck, hurls them into an unshrived eternity. The place where his tail ought to be is fast developing; a tiny yellow comb is faintly visible. Alas! I see plainly that Time, who scatters his poppy-seeds[2] with a ruthless hand, is bent on his destruction. For the day on which he becomes what Kirsty terms "a cockerel," his fate is sealed. But, then, our own special doom awaits each of us; and Hector has this advantage, in being shelled a fowl, he never sinks into sallow meditations as to his coming fate. The present hour, with its worms and sunshine and sweet opportunities of [b]theft—enough for him. He listens to all the speculations that can be addressed to him with unmoved composure. Only this morning one held him in her hand, and said: "Ah, little feathered atom, so lately shelled from one eternity into another; fleeting pilgrim in a passing show; confined to a few roods of earth, yet linked by subtle chains to the remotest star—nay, perchance, to spirit itself! To know thee wholly, how

[a]X] VIII *E2*[+] [b]theft—] theft, is *E2*[+]

largely must the boundaries of human knowledge be widened. Time and space, and the solar system—all are necessary to thy existence——"

'Hector listened with round rolling eyes, but at this point he made a sudden dart at the speaker's mouth, as if it suddenly struck him that it was alive, and possibly as good to eat as a beetle.

'Yesterday I made several visits to sick people. Two of them—Mrs. Rupert and Mrs. Morland—have been slowly dying for nearly two years. Do you remember hearing mother speak of them? One of consumption, the other of some internal malady. Can one witness such long unavailing struggles without pondering why human beings should endure so much, all to no [a]purpose? The weak voice of the patient, the disordered bed, the untidiness of the house, the worn looks of those in charge, the little messes of cooking going on perpetually, the close smell never absent from the sick-rooms of the poor, the array of medicine-bottles—some half empty, some scarcely touched, telling their own tale of baffled attempts at relief—each little point affects me distinctly, till the whole combined renders me abjectly wretched as long as I am an onlooker. Then, for a little after escaping into the sunshine, instead of being glad that the horizon is so wide, and the curves of bird's-wings beating the air more exquisite than sonnets, I fall into a sombre reverie, on the myriad ways that lead out of existence. Not because I love death, but because I love to be alive so much that a weak simulacrum of life seems too unendurable.

'It is the beggarly elements of existence thrust into prominence, in a frantic effort at keeping body and soul together long after vitality is really over. People speak about waiting for the end. But has not the end of the body come when it is smitten with an incurable agonizing [b]malady? We are careful not to leave Nature to herself when children are born into the world.[3] Why should she be left to herself when she devises malignant tortures for taking people out of it? How skilfully she sometimes prolongs the agony! When the small thread of life is worn and frayed almost through, there is often a kind of pause. "Oh, I am much better to-day, thank

[a]purpose . . . [107:28] really over.] purpose? . . . . *E2*$^{+}$ [b]malady . . . [109:3] of death.] malady? *E2*$^{+}$

God!" the poor women say, holding out their thin fingers. But in a day or two there is redoubled suffering. One learns so to mistrust —almost to hate—those betterments which serve no purpose but to make the nerves more sensitive to fresh pain.

'There is a man in the same row in which Mrs. Rupert lives who has been dying an unconscionable time of cancer in the tongue. It is now eaten away to the roots, so that he cannot articulate. Morphia has almost lost all power to ease him. At times he has such paroxysms of maddening suffering that his wife has to run out of the house. He has often beaten her violently. Yet before he was attacked by this disease he was a quiet, easy-natured man, an affectionate husband and father, and a good neighbour. If poison had a brain, could it invent a more diabolical way of killing and degrading at the same time? It seems to me an extraordinary mixture of timidity and superstition that makes us connive at keeping a fellow-creature in existence[4] under such conditions. I am convinced that it is grossly impious.

'Life is so full of beauty and poetry when we are healthy, and, yes—moderately good. The sky above us, and the earth under our feet, and the sea round the earth; morning and night, and the changing seasons; the people we love, and the books that are dear to us—I feel the joy of all so deeply that when I see a human existence reduced to its dregs—hopelessly cut off from all beauty and enjoyment—a great dreariness falls on me. I sit at the bedsides for a little, and talk or read and leave little medical comforts; but here, as elsewhere, we so soon come upon our limitations. When people are in really desperate straits we can do nothing for them. No one can help them but God, and—I do not write carelessly, only what is forced upon me—He does not seem to mind. And then, after one feels choked with pity for them, comes the more selfish thought—These, then, are the possibilities that life may hold for any one of us! It is not that one would shrink from pain in itself so much, though it is horrible. It is that the heart quails at the thought of the havoc which an ungovernable disease may wreak on the moral nature. While we are sane, we can control ourselves, and remain

'"Victor over all
That tyranny of fortune can inflict."[5]

But we can no more know how a fatal, long-continued illness may react on the nerves and brain than we can foretell the sensations we shall experience in the last throes of death.

*"It would seem that when I enter on moralities, my dear, you and I are undone, like salt in water. At any rate, you will not feel disposed to grumble that, just at the moment I was dipping the inquisitive beak of my pen in ink, to come without further phrase or disguise on the yolk at the heart of euthanasia, who should call but Mr. Billy Stein. You know how he makes these sudden appearances from the far north. The thermometer is very high; the wind is from the east, and threatens to veer to the north; there are crowds of undelightful things that ought to be done the day before to-morrow; duty, like an old hag that ought to be burnt at the stake for sedition, peers in at you from time to time; and then, to fill up the measure, in comes Mr. Billy! Here is an aboriginal myth he told me: Once upon a time the pelicans went to fish and found a great deal of barracoota, which they left in a gully while they went for more. Up came some greedy thieving magpies and stole the booty. The pelicans, in revenge, rolled them in the ashes, and that is the reason why they are partly black.[6] This belongs to the same class of legend as that of the venomous snake who made the moon angry by killing so many blacks, till at last she burnt its head as it slept in the grass at night. So that is the reason why its head is black and its bite harmless.[7] You see, Australian myths have this in common with those of classic Greece, that they also endeavour to give an account of the origin of things.

'You ask about my translation of "Faust."[8] I have not done so many lines per day since you left. You see the second part is to our speech, with its many one-syllable words, a perfect trap for the translator. I am glad, however, you encouraged me to undertake this task, for in no other way can one draw so near to the heart of a work in a foreign tongue. But as for any literary value, of course the thing is naught. I could make you die of laughing at subtilties, screwed words, and rhymes hacked and raked all to no purpose. The performance is like nothing so much as a barb-horse[9] that hath his eyes blinded trying to race a soaring eagle. But then I feel

*E2+ resume: see entry b on p. 107

that I have climbed a little nearer to Goethe—and is there anything in life more delightful than the tranquil friendship that grows out of long and frequent intercourse with a great writer? One who is not only among the most majestic sons of light, but a frontier savant of life—who penetrated to the outposts of human nature, and unflinchingly noted the vantage-ground of good and evil.

'Early next week I am going on one of my periodical visits to Dr. and Mrs. Stein. They have staying with them, just now, an old friend, who arrived from Germany a few days ago—a man who is as steeped in research as a seaweed is in ozone. But is it? Well, if not, it ought to be.

'It is cruel of you to vaunt the praises of the Melbourne climate over ours, when we are having such atrocious hot winds. Yesterday, some of us did nothing but lie on the floor in Apostolic raiment,[10] swallow ice, and feebly murmur the old aboriginal incantation: "Sun, sun, burn your wood—burn your internal substance and go down!"'