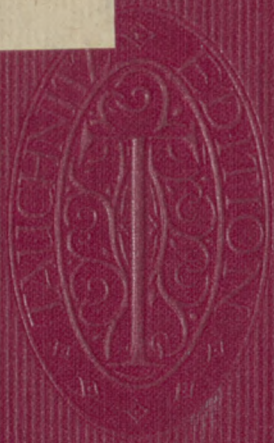

The Waters of Lethe

by

D. Gerard

TAUCHNITZ EDITION

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THE WATERS OF LETHE

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

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THE WATERS OF LETHE

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

(MADAME LONGARD DE LONGGARDE)

AUTHOR OF "LADY BABY," "ONE YEAR," "ITINERANT DAUGHTERS," "THE CITY OF ENTICEMENT," "THE UNWORTHY PACT," ETC.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1914

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THE WATERS OF LETHE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROMISE.

"VIKTOR!"

It was a woman's quavering voice that spoke from out of the shadows of the sick-room.

In reply there came only the faint hiss of the oil in the night-light and the roll of a cab round the corner. Although it was scarcely midnight, Vienna, that most "early-to-bed" of capitals, lay fast asleep under the winter sky.

More querulously it came again:

"Viktor!"

He awoke with a guilty start, to find his neck half dislocated by the edge of the only armchair in the flat. Quite sufficient explanation this of the interrupted dream in which an executioner's axe had figured prominently.

"What is it, *Mutterl?*"

In his stockinged feet Viktor shuffled towards the bed in the corner, rubbing the dregs of sleep out of his eyes with the knuckles of a prizefighter. For the size of the shadow thrown upon the wall of the meanly-furnished room the flickering flame of the night-light was only partly responsible, though instinctively Viktor curved his back, as though in the effort to accommodate his frame to the modest space.

"Are you wanting anything, mother? Shall I settle your pillows?"

His big clumsy hands went out timidly towards them. He was so painfully conscious, poor boy, of not having been planned out for a sick-nurse.

"No, it's not the pillows. It's something else."

The halting voice paused.

"Viktor!" A pair of distended blue eyes fastened themselves upon his face. "I believe that you love me."

"Oh, *Mutterl!*"

He was on his knees now, groping wildly for her wasted fingers—the needle-pricked fingers of a seamstress—which, when he had found, he handled as gingerly as though they were of glass.

"Oh, mother—I have never known how to tell it you, but I have always loved you as much as—as much as you love Max!"

It came with a dry sob, too convulsive for tears.

She smiled at him gently—a smile which seemed to come from a great distance—too great a distance for the reading of the history which perchance lay behind those few words.

"Ah—then you will do what I ask of you. It is about Max that I want to speak. Is he asleep?"

"Yes, mother. Shall I wake him?"

"No, no—on no account! He needs his sleep. Don't disturb him. You know how delicate he is, don't you?"

"Yes, mother, I know. But you, too, need your sleep. Can this that you want to tell me not wait till the morning?"

"The morning!"

She said it with a queer little laugh whose meaning pierced him as with a fine needle. And then for a minute she lay still, evidently gathering together the remnants of her strength.

When she opened her eyes they appeared to have shrunk in size, while growing more intense in expression. And now it was she who groped for his hand.

"I want you to promise me something, Viktor!"

"It is promised already, mother—blindly."

"I want you to swear to me to be not a brother but a father to Max. He needs a father—such a child as he is! Alone he will never be able to fight the battle of life; he is so weak—so frail, both in body and —yes, also in soul. But you have strength enough for two. Your shoulders are so broad—broad enough for his burden as well as your own. You will stand between him and the evil things of life—always—always! If you want me to know peace, swear it me, Viktor!"

She did not say "If you want me to die quiet," yet they both understood.

"I swear it, mother!" Viktor managed to utter, though he was choking.

A long sigh of relief raised the painfully labouring chest, and again the far-away smile shone upon him—not so far-away this time.

"Thank you, my boy! You *are* my boy, you know, though not my only one. You have never doubted my love, have you, Viktor? Even though I have not cuddled you as I have done Max. You are too big to cuddle, you know;" and the bloodless lips twitched whimsically.

This time Viktor only nodded, his throat being seemingly tied up into one huge knot which not all his strength of will was able to loosen.

"Kiss me, dear! And let that kiss be the seal of our compact!"

He kissed her with as infinite precautions as though she were a bit of brittle china; and then as her eyes once more closed, hung over her with bated breath, seeking to imprint upon his memory the beloved lines which he knew himself to be looking upon for the last time in life.

* * * * *

Two days later the coffin—a plain deal coffin, for this was a third-class funeral—was carried from the room; and two hours after that again, the brothers, with crape bands round their hats, and a good deal of mud upon their best Sunday boots, returned to the empty shell of what had once been a home. During forty-eight hours Death had ruled sovereign here; but it was Life which they found waiting for them—in the shape of the chemist's last bill, still unpaid. The daily struggle—grown ten times more acute—demanded imperiously to be faced.

With his elbow on the table and his head in his hand Viktor strove to review the situation, while in a corner Max sobbed as unrestrainedly as a child, his face hidden against the back of the same armchair in which the elder brother had held his vigils.

Resolved into its elements the situation was simple to the point of desperation.

The items follow here:—

Ages of the orphans: nineteen and seventeen respectively.

Ready money in the house: about sixty kronen (under £3).

Balance at the bank: non-existent.

Further resources: ditto.

Moreover, the rent for the two small rooms and the kitchen which they inhabited fell due within a few days.

Also this was the threshold of winter, and the coal-box at a low ebb.

All this Viktor had known, more or less, when he had sworn to his mother to stand between Max and the evil things of life; but it was only now that the realisation of what he had undertaken came over him. For the fragment of a minute despair darkened his soul, but was gone in the next, like the shadow of some bird of prey scared off by a resolute gesture. It was true that the burden was heavy; but it was true also that his shoulders were broad. He would square them, so as to carry both burdens—as *she* had said.

At the mere recollection his massive features lit up; for his devotion to his once beautiful mother had smacked of enthusiasm. Maybe it was his own size and strength which had filled him with so tender a

reverence for her exquisite frailty. For in the days when Karl Vogler had wooed Ida Berg she was like nothing so much as some delicate figure which a master-hand had cunningly carved out of ivory, with just a dash of pale gold to give the last note of refinement; far too costly an object for the adornment of a poor schoolmaster's lodging. Under the knocks and friction of penury the costly object had suffered much damage, the ivory grown yellow and even cracked, but to the end her beauty had remained traceable, gaining in pathos what it had lost in perfection. When two years ago the schoolmaster had died quite suddenly it was upon Viktor that fell the task of shielding the poor tired ornament from further knocks. That task was over now—but an even harder one awaited him.

Even without the oath he had sworn Viktor would have felt more like Max's father than his brother. Not even maternal preference had been able to engender jealousy. Profoundly, even painfully, conscious as he was of his own size and prosaically robust health, it seemed to Viktor a perfectly just partition that the care and caresses should fall to the share of the delicate Max, the inheritor of much of his mother's frail beauty, while his own portion consisted chiefly of wholesome neglect.

When after his father's death his mother had begun to spoil her eyes and prick her fingers by taking in sewing, in order to enable one of her sons to prepare for university studies, it had seemed to Viktor equally just that Max should be the favoured one; while for himself a commercial school was all that could be attained. Max had not only quicker brains than his

own, but was fit for nothing but intellectual work, while he at a pinch, could make use of his hands. They were his despair, those hands of his—the hands of an athlete—which touched small things uncertainly, for fear of inadvertent destruction. The fact of having lived between two such delicate beings as his mother and his brother had developed in him a habit of moving with an almost comical circumspection, of entering a room with a sort of deprecating air, as though dumbly apologising for his own unwieldiness.

When, after five minutes of profound reflection he got up now to cross the room, Viktor trod instinctively with the caution learnt during three weeks of nursing, and though he knew that not even the heaviest step could waken her whom he had just laid to rest.

"Max!" he said hoarsely, laying a tentative hand upon the other's shoulder. "Don't cry, Max! It won't bring her back."

Max lifted a flushed face from the back of the arm-chair. Despite the streaming eyes and quivering lips, despite even the unsightly red streaks which the creases in the shabby covering had impressed upon the delicate skin, it was the face of a cherub.

"What shall I do? What shall I do without her?" he gasped.

To Viktor's brown eyes the tears started as he gazed down, yearning, over the beautiful boy.

"What is to become of me without her, Viktor? I have got nobody now!"

Then it was that Viktor's heart gave a leap, almost of exultation. At that moment he knew—not by any process of logic—that, come what might, he would be

able to keep his promise. And what joy in life is there greater than that of feeling yourself equal to your task? He did not yet know what he was going to do, but already he knew that he was going to do it.

It was gently and yet with a new firmness that, bending towards his brother, he said:

"Yes, Max—you have got me!"

CHAPTER II.

THE OVERCOAT.

"VIKTOR!"

This time it was a man's voice that said the name in accents well nigh of amazement. That morning—somewhat later than usual, owing to the hushing of street noises—Vienna had awoke to a transformation scene. All night long the flakes had descended, padding the pavement as though with a coat of wadding.

Before daybreak strings of "unemployed," to whom those flakes were literally a manna from heaven, had collected before all the municipal stations: a miscellaneous company, in which coats which had once known the insides of drawing-rooms jostled the jacket of the *bona fide* workman. A good many hats pressed low upon pale foreheads, and frayed collars turned up to ears, more in hope of disguisement than in fear of the cold.

Among the hats pressed lowest and collars turned up highest were those of Viktor Vogler. Although within the past two months he had made acquaintance with soup-kitchens and other things which so long as

Frau Vogler had enjoyed her modest widow's pension he had known only by hearsay, he had not foreseen the moment when he would take place in a *queue* of snow-shovellers. If it had not been for that cough-lotion which Max was so badly in need of, the school-master's son within him would have revolted at the idea of manual work. Owing to the chill of a barely heated room Max had been down with a bad influenza for two weeks past; and, although now convalescent, the necessity of that lotion was imperative. It was last night only, as he came home in a snowstorm from another of his fruitless visits to an agency, that the idea had struck him. Since suitable employment was not to be had, he would have to take to unsuitable. As a clerk no one would have him, owing to incomplete training; as an office-boy he was considered too clumsy —"slim and agile" seemed to be the favoured mark; but when it came to muscular strength, who could dispute his capacities?

His turn come, it was with an approving glance that the official in charge handed him his spade. No doubt in this case as to the bargain the municipality was making. Once at work his spirits rose, together with his circulation. The mere physical exercise satisfied the needs of the athlete within him, while the prospect of the evening cheered his spirits. At last, at last he would bring home money in his hand, instead of having to take it out of Max's; for, strangely enough, it had been the younger brother who, by means of the lessons which Viktor had succeeded in procuring him, had, so far, acted as bread-winner. Much perusal of newspaper advertisements had brought to light the fact

that a wealthy paper manufacturer was looking out for an intelligent youth, in order to help on his unintelligent son with his Latin. Orthodox tutors having been tried without success, experts had recommended a comrade, by way of a stimulant. It seemed an extraordinary piece of good luck when Max—aided no doubt by his angelic face—got the job—one that, owing to the lack of classical studies, lay out of Viktor's reach. The influenza had put a check on the chief source of income. For this reason alone—quite apart from sentiment—it was necessary that Max should get well quickly.

"Viktor! *You?*"

The dreaded recognition had come, after all. It was the voice of one of his quondam schoolfellows, not seen for two months—even the commercial school having become one of the current impossibilities.

A little redder in the face than exercise had already made him, Viktor nodded impatiently, and the other, with a final stare, passed on, half amused and half frightened by the unexpected sight—a sight which Viktor knew would be discussed in class next day.

Not that he cared so very much now, for the moment of reward was close at hand.

The first visit was to the chemist, the second to a food shop. When, presently, he opened the door of the attic room which the brothers now inhabited he was one of the happiest individuals in Vienna.

"Max!" he exclaimed in the next moment, for the invalid had met him on the threshold.

"I never allowed you to get up!"

Max embraced him stormily.

"I had to, Viktor! I'm ever so much better. And

Herr Bäumel has written to ask whether the lessons can be resumed next week: you see, he has waited for me, after all! I answered at once that they could, and then I got up to try my strength. You will let me go on Monday, won't you, Viktor? It's so deadly dull sitting cooped up here, and it's so deliciously warm in the Bäumel's rooms."

"We'll talk about that when you've taken your lotion," said Viktor, proudly putting down the bottle on the table. "And eaten your supper." The second parcel in his hand followed the first. "It's a bit of your favourite sausage, and here's a drop of that wine which the doctor recommended."

Max positively danced.

"Oh, Viktor, you are wonderful! Where did you get the money from? Have you found work?"

"Never mind where I got it from—honestly, any way."

And Max, questioning no further, fell upon the sausage.

While hungrily devouring his own share of the spoil Viktor watched his brother. His face had grown thinner within the last few weeks, but the colour of health was creeping back to it. His own eye shone with pride. He seemed to himself to be looking upon a work of his own hands. How pleased *she* would be if she could see him!—the thought crossed his mind. And following upon it a new terror; "God preserve him from a relapse!"

On the following Monday Max resumed the lessons in the paper manufacturer's house. It was a little premature, perhaps; but there seemed no choice for it,

for the manna had ceased to fall from heaven. Besides, it was hard to resist Max's own ardent desire; for those two hours spent every afternoon in a well-heated room surrounded by comfort in every shape, had long since become the bright spots of his existence.

"It's true that when I come out of the house the street feels colder than ever," Max remarked. "If only my overcoat were thicker!"

Upon which Viktor immediately began calculating how long it would take to save up enough to buy Max a really warm overcoat, in place of the meagre garment which now did duty as such.

Before the end of the week Viktor, returning from another raid upon the work agencies, found Max once more upon the threshold.

"Oh, Viktor! Such good luck! Just look at this!"

He was displaying to his brother's astonished gaze a fur-lined coat of a distinctly superior stamp.

"Where on earth did you get that from?" asked Viktor, almost aghast.

"From Herr Bäumel. I suppose he noticed that my own was so thin, and perhaps he was afraid of another interruption of the lessons, for Franz is getting on famously with his Latin, you know. It's an old one of his own, I think, and not much too big for me. Just look here, Viktor!"

He was slipping into the coat as he spoke.

"An old one! Why, it looks almost quite new!" was all that Viktor, overwhelmed by so much good fortune, could think of saying.

"It *is* as good as new; but that's no wonder, since of course Herr Bäumel gets a new one each winter;

he's a swell, you know. It's not the latest model, I suppose, but what do I care, so long as it's warm! *I* don't mind being in last year's fashion—not I!"

His excited laugh sounded almost hysterical; but Viktor did not wonder at it, as little as he wondered at the flushed face and the words that tripped each other up. Such a windfall as this was enough to upset any youth's equanimity.

And yet, in spite of the windfall, the dreaded relapse occurred, brought on by one of those icy blasts to which the capital on the Danube lies all too much exposed. And this time there fell no snow with it; and even if it had fallen Viktor would not have dared to quit the side of the bed upon which Max lay in high fever. There came an evening upon which Viktor grimly asked himself what there remained to pawn? His watch was gone already; so were the six silver teaspoons which had been part of his mother's marriage portion. What more?

As he stood up to sweep the attic with a hungrily keen glance his eye fell upon the fur-lined overcoat hanging upon a nail in the corner. To be sure! There remained that. Max would probably not consent. To judge from the recurrence of the subject during the half-delirious talk of the past night, the overcoat occupied his mind to an exaggerated degree. But Max was asleep now, and the need was pressing. By the time he would again require it Viktor would find means of redeeming the precious garment.

A quarter of an hour later he stood in the nearest pawnbroker's shop with the overcoat upon his arm.

"How much will you give me for this?"

The man—a beady-eyed Hebrew with a nose as sharp as a gimlet—turned over the garment in the manner of a *connoisseur*. His expert, yellow fingers passed over the fur lining and across the grain of the cloth, while the beady eyes shot towards Viktor's own shabby coat, as though establishing comparisons.

"Is that overcoat your own?"

"Yes—no—it is my brother's. How much will you give me for it?"

"I might give you fifty kronen; but I'll trouble you with your name and address, all the same."

"My name and address?" repeated Viktor, taken aback. "What for? Do you suppose I have stolen the thing?"

"I'm not supposing anything; but it's as well to be on the safe side—so 'cute as the police have become nowadays. You want those fifty kronen, don't you? and I want your name and address. It's a fair exchange. Free to you to chuck the bargain if it doesn't suit you."

The beady eyes were taking careful stock of him, the while, and the gimlet of a nose apparently drilling holes in his face.

Then Viktor, reflecting that he might not find another pawnbroker's open, since closing hour was near, haughtily gave the required address, and presently left the shop with fifty kronen in his pocket. After all—so spoke commonsense—pawnbrokers, with the suspicious eye of the police upon them, could not well help having developed into a suspicious race. But the insinuation rankled, all the same. Back in the attic room he could not keep his indignation to himself; the less so

as Max, from whom he would have preferred to conceal the disappearance of the overcoat, received him with a question concerning it.

He was sitting up in bed, staring towards the corner of the attic.

"Am I blind, Viktor, or is that nail empty? I know the overcoat was on it when I went to sleep."

Then Viktor burst out with his tale.

"Just imagine that dirty Hebrew asking for my address! Just as though I were a suspicious character! Max dear—what is the matter?"

For Max had flung himself face downwards upon his pillow—a prey to some sudden access of despair.

"Don't mind it, Max," soothed Viktor, bending over him; "I know you want your overcoat, but I will redeem it before you are well again—see if I don't."

The face which Max's feverish gesture uncovered startled Viktor by its look of terror almost more than by its whiteness.

"It's not that, Viktor—it's not that! Oh, how shall I ever tell you?"

"Tell me what, Max?"

"About that overcoat. *I* know why your address was wanted. Viktor, did you really believe that Herr Bäumel had made me a present of the coat?"

"Of course I believed it. Did you not tell me so?"

"Viktor," said Max, in a thick whisper, "that was an invented story. Herr Bäumel gave me nothing. I —I *stole* that overcoat."

Again he lay with his face buried, a nervous shiver running down his spine.

"I don't think I quite understand," said Viktor

slowly, after an interminable minute, filled only with street noises.

His eyes still looked dazed, but already his massive features were beginning to set sternly.

Once more Max turned himself over on his back.

"Why do you make me say it again?" He spoke almost peevishly. "Once is bad enough, surely. *I stole that overcoat,* Viktor; is that plain enough, now? I did not mean to do it; it somehow happened of itself. And the pawnbroker asking for the address can only mean that the police have been given notice; and the next thing to happen will be that they will be here to arrest me. Oh, Viktor, save me! save me!"

He clutched wildly at his brother's arm. At the touch of those clinging fingers the sternness upon Viktor's face abruptly relaxed.

"Tell me how it was, Max," he said, unsteadily.

CHAPTER III.

THE CONFESSION.

"It was this way," said Max, with burning cheeks but glib tongue. "You remember that very cold day last week?—the first day of the North wind? That was the day. When I came out of the Bäumels' house it felt like plunging into cold water. Before I had walked five minutes I was chilled to the bone. I thought with dread of the Ringstrasse to cross, where I knew the full blast would meet me. Then just before reaching it I passed a coffee-house; the lights were blazing within; the people at the tables looked so comfortable and warm;

it seemed to me a sort of paradise. I had some money in my pocket, for Herr Bäumel had just paid me, and I thought to myself that to step in for a moment and drink a cup of coffee and shake off the chill might save me a cold, and thus really come cheaper in the end. So in I went. While I was drinking the coffee I heard the man at the next table ask for a cognac, and suddenly it struck me that cognac was the right thing to help me to face the cold. As the waiter passed the table with the bottle I stopped him. But the cognac was much stronger than I had expected. I am sure it was the cognac that was the cause of—of what followed."

Again Max's face disappeared into the pillow.

"You had better go on," said Viktor in a low voice; "in case we are—interrupted."

Breathless with agitation Max resumed.

"I was almost afraid of not being able to walk steadily to the door, but I managed it. I had taken off my overcoat; it was hanging on a rack near the entrance, among a lot of others. A waiter came up to help me in my search. "Is it this one?" he said, holding out the coat you know. My eyes fell on the fur lining and would not leave it. It seemed to hypnotise me, somehow. "Yes, that is mine," I said, without exactly meaning to say it, and yet feeling at the moment as though it actually were mine—because I needed it so badly. It happened to fit me tolerably, as you know; and in the next moment I was out in the street, and almost laughing in the face of the blast. It was the cognac, Viktor—I am sure I would not have done it without the cognac. You can understand, can't you?"

"I think I can—partly. But Max—next day—when

the effects of the cognac had passed, what made you not take back the coat and explain the mistake?"

Max's angelic countenance clouded with aggrievement.

"What made me? I suppose it's no use to explain to you what it means for a shivering wretch like me to get inside a fur-lined coat for the first time in his life. I knew that I ought to give it back, but I simply couldn't —I couldn't face existence without it. I think I always meant to take it back to the coffee-house some day and make up some story to explain the delay, but I put it off and off. I had no will in the matter. I tell you that that coat hypnotised me. Oh, Viktor—do say that you understand."

"I understand," said Viktor, though his soul was protesting, but disarmed by the deprecating eyes hanging upon his face.

"But perhaps there might still be time—"

He broke off, for Max, with a panic-stricken glance towards the door, had clutched at his arm.

"They are coming," he whispered. "Ah, Viktor, can you not save me?"

The steps upon the landing were followed by a sharp knock.

"Save me, Viktor! What shall I do?"

"Nothing," said Viktor, rising abruptly. "Perhaps I can save you; but only if you promise to do nothing,— not to interfere."

He reached the door just as the knock was impatiently repeated.

The sight of the helmeted policeman on the threshold was scarcely a surprise.

"Viktor Vogler lodges here," asserted rather than

questioned a grating voice, proceeding from out of an exceedingly hairy countenance.

"He does."

"Are you Viktor Vogler?"

"I am."

The possessor of the helmet and the hairy countenance stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Viktor Vogler, I declare you to be arrested. You will follow me to the police-station immediately."

"What am I arrested for?" asked Viktor with a steadiness which surprised both himself and the policeman.

"On the suspicion of theft. The particulars will be given you at the station. The question is only whether you will come along quietly or whether I shall have to employ physical force."

As he said it the helmeted man cast a somewhat doubtful glance up and down Viktor's figure. He himself resembled nothing so much as a performing bear dressed up for an occasion, yet he was not conscious of any overweening desire to close with his victim.

"I will come," said Viktor with unexpected mildness, "but not until I have made some arrangement about my brother. He is ill, as you see."

"So I see," agreed the limb of the law, from whose voice the gruffness had abruptly departed. It was an artificial rather than a natural product, and in face of this want of resistance fell somewhat lamely to the ground. From out of the forest of hair a pair of anything but ferocious eyes looked towards the bed.

"What will become of my brother in case I am—detained?"

"If he is ill enough he will be taken to the hospital, of course, and better looked after than here."

"To be sure! But for this evening? I can't leave him quite alone, can I?"

"Heaven preserve!" agreed the dressed up bear, relaxing into the purest Viennese *lingo*. "But the *Hausmeisterin* seems a decent sort of woman. I'll fetch her up."

At the door he turned and brought up another helping of gruffness, in order to say in his best professional manner:

"No tricks, mind! I'll be back in two minutes. There's only one door to the house, and you'll find me between you and it."

Alone with his brother, Viktor hurried back to the side of the bed, upon which Max lay, wide-eyed, having followed the short dialogue in an amazement which seemed to have paralysed his faculties.

Now he sat up excitedly.

"I know what you want to do, Viktor," he stuttered—"I know! You are going to get locked up in my place; that's your way of saving me! But I can't allow it! I won't have it! When that policeman comes back I shall tell him that it was I——"

He stopped, for Viktor's hand was upon his mouth.

"No—you will tell him nothing, Max. Listen to me—we shall not be alone for long. Perhaps I sha'n't get locked up at all. I shall try and plead a mistake—make out that the overcoat would have been returned as soon as redeemed. And even if it should come to the worst, surely I am fitter to go to prison than you are. The hospital is your proper place; it's a piece of

positive good luck your getting into it. Just think of the cold cells, Max! You wouldn't survive it—even at your best."

"I can't allow it! I can't allow it!" moaned Max, with a little of the determination gone out of his tone.

"You *must* allow it, Max—for my sake as well as your own. Remember that being branded as a thief means for you instant dismissal by Herr Bäumel, and what is to become of us without your monthly earnings? while my disappearance for awhile will, alas, make no difference to our income."

"That is true," murmured Max. "But the shame! the shame!"

"The shame is our common property," whispered Viktor hurriedly, for the steps were again upon the landing: "But there is no help for that: it must be borne."

For one moment the brothers were locked in each other's arms, and whatever objections still trembled upon the younger's lips were extinguished by the elder's painfully vigorous kiss, for, be it remembered, these were Austrian and not English boys.

It was Viktor, who, cutting short all further farewells, and barely stopping to give the necessary directions to the *Hausmeisterin,* hurried his escort from the room, rather than *vice versa.*

The distance to the police-station was mercifully short. As by the side of his armed companion he moved through the crowd, Viktor's hat was pressed down lower than had been that of the quondam snow-shoveller. How much worse would recognition be now than on the day when he held a spade in his hand!

It was with a sigh of relief that he reached the shelter of the police-station.

Questioned by an ascetic looking personage in uniform who sat behind a deal table, he had to begin by collecting his thoughts. Even the statement of his name, age, and station came only after preliminary pauses, as though he were not quite sure of his own identity.

"Do you recognise this garment?" the ascetic personage proceeded to ask, suddenly producing from behind him the fur-lined overcoat which Viktor knew only too well.

"Yes."

"Is it the same which you pawned this evening?"

"Yes."

"This coat was stolen out of the Café Stern on January 22nd. Do you acknowledge the theft."

This time the preliminary pause was longer, but was followed by the same monosyllable, the only one which his tongue seemed able to achieve just then.

"Y—yes."

"That simplifies matters," said the official, causing the coat to disappear as suddenly as it had appeared. "Constable—to the lock-up! The case will be gone into to-morrow."

Then only Viktor's power of speech returned. Abruptly he remembered that he had meant to make a defence. He would have one try for it, at least.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, scarlet up to his hair roots; "when I said that I stole it I didn't mean it that way, but only that I took it by mistake for my own."

"And it was by mistake too that you took it to the pawnbroker's, wasn't it?" suggested the uniformed ascetic, unmasking himself as a wag.

Viktor turned redder.

"I—I was drunk when I took it—I had been drinking cognac."

"How many glasses—if I may ask?"

"One."

Everyone, including the hairy policeman, laughed. The defence was just a trifle too naïve.

"You *do* look as if one glass of cognac would bowl you over," pronounced the wag, measuring Viktor from between narrowed eyelids. Upon which a convulsion shook the room.

"And you have been drunk ever since, I suppose. What a wonderful cognac that must have been! Well, well—I daresay you will sleep it off in the lock-up."

But Viktor had no chance of sleeping off anything that night. Around him, upon mouldy straw-mattresses, his companions in shame snored lustily, yet his own eyes would not close. It was not the ignominy of his situation that kept him awake, but rather some strange, new exultation, lifting him miles above it. Upon the darkness his fancy painted his mother's face, with a smile upon it more radiant than he had ever seen in life. And that smile was reward enough.

. . . . .

Four weeks passed before he again trod the streets, a free man. By rights at least three times that number of weeks would have been due to the value of the overcoat which turned out to be an even more superior article than the brothers' inexperience had surmised.

Viktor's avowal, as well as the first offence plea, had helped to lower the sentence.

It was in the attic room that the brothers met again; and here it was also that Max broke down.

"You despise me, Viktor—I know you despise me!" he sobbed upon the other's neck.

In reply Viktor lifted his brother's chin and gazed into his face.

"You look almost well. Did they take care of you in the hospital?"

"Can't you see that they did? Oh, I wish I had died there? Viktor, tell me that you do not despise me!"

Then Viktor told him, not so much in words as by the protective clasp of his arm.

There followed a review of their situation, which was ever so much blacker than it had been four weeks ago, since, despite Viktor's self-sacrifice, Max had lost the precious lessons. Herr Bäumel's eye having fallen by chance upon the account of Viktor Vogler's arrest, he had immediately decided that the presence of a thief's brother in his immaculate household would be a defilement.

"It will be harder than ever to get employment now," said Max despondently. "What a pity we can't change our names!"

"We can't do that; but perhaps we could change our place of residence."

Max caught at the idea.

"Yes, Viktor—let's go away—anywhere, where nobody knows anything about—about the overcoat! Why shouldn't we emigrate to America?"

"And the passage money?"

Max's head sank in discouragement.

A few days later Viktor came home with a face which caused Max to exclaim:

"Viktor, what is it? You have found something?"

"Yes, I think I have found something—a mere chance—through an advertisement. An agent is collecting waiters, both trained and untrained, for some big London restaurants. There is a great dearth of them, it seems, and the season is just opening. An agreement has to be signed, in return for which your journey is paid."

"Waiters!" repeated Max, crestfallen.

To a student of Latin and Greek the idea was humiliating.

"It's a come-down, of course—but only a temporary one. Once in London and our time served out we can look for other employment. It's the only possible way of getting there without money. I spoke to the agent, and he is ready to take us both on; but we would have to sign to-morrow, as they start in three days—a whole gang of them, I believe. I'm ready to sign if you are. It can't be so very difficult to learn to hand plates."

"I'm ready, too!" said Max, recovering from the moral shock undergone. "London isn't America, but it's quite decently far from Vienna. So, here's for London!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLACK BAG.

THE big, pillared dining-room teemed with life, but with a life which bore a stamp of its own. At small, round tables serious-looking, mostly middle-aged men, whose faultless waistcoats were crossed by heavy gold watch-chains, were seriously eating their luncheon. Many of them had important-looking black bags beside them, upon which they kept the corner of an eye while eating—this being an East-end restaurant much favoured by City men. But for the chink of plates few sounds, beyond mastication, were audible, for the reason that these people had small leisure for conversation. Here and there a solitary luncher was jotting down figures upon a scrap of paper; the rest seemed to be doing sums in their heads.

All at once a large proportion of these heads—generally bald—was turned abruptly, for a crash of crockery had rent the almost church-like stillness.

"It's that big fellow again," remarked a florid, flaxen-whiskered man of fifty who looked like a prosperous farmer, and who was prosperous, though not a farmer. "I saw it coming. He's been hovering round that table in the corner for three minutes past; seems to have been so interested in the conversation that he

clean forgot the dishes in his hands. This is the third time I've seen him come to grief. Wonder why they engage chaps of that sort? About as much qualified for a waiter as is an elephant for a ballet-dancer."

"Bull in a china-shop," suggested his companion with a short laugh. "He's catching it hot though, poor bull!"

No doubt he was, to judge from the face of the head waiter who had flown to the spot in order to pour low-toned but evidently emphatic language into the ear of the "bull," who, very red in the face, was remorsefully collecting the fragments.

"Would look more in place on a football field, would he not?"

"Don't suppose he's ever seen one. His stock of English doesn't seem to go much beyond 'Biftek' and 'Raiss Buddin'!"

"Ah, that explains the attraction of the corner table. Nothing could hail straighter from the Fatherland than those two ruffians."

The two individuals referred to wore almost the only beards in the room—a black one and a red one, and by this as well as by the sit of their nondescript clothes, formed the single note of dissonance in the almost oppressive respectability of the apartment. Among all the knives at work theirs were the only ones that travelled unashamed between the salt-cellar and their hairy lips, while in their efforts to secure privacy by bringing their ill-groomed heads closer together, a good deal of sprawling came in.

"How those walnuts do stain!" observed the florid man, looking disapprovingly at the tips of his plump,

pink fingers. "Must give them a touch of soap before I move on."

"Going straight back to the bank?"

"Not quite straight. Got something in here which I have to get rid of first"—with a slight tap to the bag beside him, accompanied by a confidential wink. "That's why I'm in need of soap. Finger-tips very conspicuous, you know, while counting out bank-notes. Don't wait for me."

Picking up the bag—it was a particularly shiny and important-looking one—he moved over to the lavatory, at a comfortable, after-luncheon pace. Here, beside a vacant basin he proceeded first to hang the bag carefully upon the knob of the towel-rack close beside him, and next to turn up his cuffs and elaborately to soap his hands. He had just achieved a nice frothy lather when a rough contact in the rear disturbed him, as some evidently ill-mannered person brushed past him. Before he had recovered from the annoyance he caught the rapid gesture of a hand beside him, followed by the horrified realisation that the bag was gone from the rack. Even with intelligent men the process of thought is the reverse of quickened by digestion, owing to which elementary fact at least two seconds were lost. He wanted to use his voice, but the orthodox cry for the occasion had escaped his memory; he wanted to use his feet, but the soapy hands seemed somehow to hinder, and while he instinctively reached for the towel another precious couple of seconds went astray. And yet, rushing out of the lavatory, towel in hand, he was still in time to see the thief making an audacious dash for the door, right through the midst of startled waiters and

staring guests. Evidently this was one of those "operators" who have made the happiest experiences in the average person's want of presence of mind in face of the unexpected. The back of the flying coat was in itself enough to tell the pursuer that this was the black-bearded luncher of the corner table.

"Hi—ho! Stop thief!" he bawled. At last he had got hold of the words. In the next moment, with the flash as of a red beard before his eyes, he came heavily to the floor, tripped up by an adroitly lifted leg.

When he had scrambled to his feet the red beard had melted away into air, and he was just giving up all hope both of the black beard and the black bag when he became aware of a man upon his back close to the exit, and another kneeling upon his chest and apparently throttling him. He had missed the moment when, under a blow calculated to fell an ox, Blackbeard had gone down like a nine-pin. When, desperately flurried, he reached the spot, the top man was just wrenching an open clasp-knife from the other's relaxing grasp. This he hurled to one side, in order to possess himself of the bag.

"Dis ees yours, ees it nod, zur?"

The heated face that looked up at him was that of the waiter who had been likened to a bull in a china-shop; and from the hand that held the bag towards him the blood was trickling freely.

Presently, public agitation having been sufficiently calmed to allow of the resumption of mastication, Mr. Gairdner—that was the florid gentleman's name—was, in an adjoining space, having an interview with the rescuer of the black bag. He had begun by offering a sovereign, in token of gratitude, but found it indignantly refused.

"I deed not do it to be baid," declared the unwieldly youth, redder than ever in the face. "If I was in vant I would dake it, but I am not in vant—now."

Mr. Gairdner looked at him more closely.

"You are a German, are you not?"

To judge from the tone of the reply it seemed that he had given fresh cause for indignation.

"No, I am nod a German, I am an Austrian."

"Ah! So much the better! That's a brand that I vastly prefer. What is your name, if I may venture to ask?"

"Viktor Vogler."

"Well, Mr. Vogler, you've done me a better turn than you know of. Do you mind telling me how you came to be so near the door in the nick of time? When last I saw you you were picking up bits of china at the other end of the room."

"It was this way, sir," explained Viktor in his broken English, of which the reader has had sufficient specimen. "They were talking German, you know, and some words that I caught made me open my ears. I didn't like the way they were looking at the bags, especially at yours. So when I saw you go into the lavatory and one of them following, I thought I might as well be between him and the door. And it was as well, you see."

"Did you know he had a knife?"

"Yes, I caught something about knives, too," admitted Viktor, with perfect simplicity.

"Good. I am extremely obliged; and wish I knew how to prove it. Do you like being a waiter?"

"No," said Viktor with the same unhesitating directness.

"Would you care to change your employment?"

"I can't change it until my time is up."

"And when it's up do you mean to go back to Austria?"

"No—certainly not!" came the answer with the vigour almost of panic.

"Got no family over there?"

"All the family I have is one brother, and he is here in London. He's a waiter, too, but in a West-end restaurant. They prefer the good-looking ones there, you know."

"Do they? I wasn't aware. How much do they pay you here?"

"Ten shillings a week."

"Our hall-porter gets two guineas. I happen to be on the look-out for one; chief occupation keeping the scum off the bank premises. You strike me as eminently suitable for the post—distinctly better at handling thieves than plates. I think I can square your employer. In the interest of his own crockery he ought to be easily managed—and, if so, would you take the post?"

"Yes, I would," said Viktor, looking straight into a pair of blue eyes whose inherent kindliness had triumphantly survived the money-making grind.

"That's all right, then. I'll speak to the manager."

"I like that lad's face," Mr. Gairdner was saying that afternoon to the same business friend with whom he had lunched. "And I flatter myself that I know an honest man when I see him. Besides, I really owe him a lift; for, quite between ourselves, I don't mind telling you that there were fifteen thousand pounds in that bag."

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

NELLA.

ALTHOUGH the month was only June, London was bowing its huge head under one of those heat waves that render mental work as distasteful as physical. The mingled rumble and roll of wheels, the beat of many feet, both of men and of horses, seemed to have massed itself into the sullen growl of some monster cowering under the red-hot rod of the tamer, and punctuated only at moments by the rebellious squeal of a motor-horn.

Even walls were but a poor protection from the red-hot rod, as Mr. Beesly, clerk in the flourishing bank of Gairdner and Co.—at present busy in shirt sleeves over a column of figures—became increasingly aware. Considering that he had the small square office all to himself for the moment, there was no objection to his availing himself of this primitive form of relief. There were other pairs of shirt sleeves besides his own exposed on the premises to-day, but there was very little conversation; little sound within the walls beyond the rustle of paper, the chink of gold, and the buzz of flies.

Decidedly the temperature was not favourable to

arithmetic. Under its influence the figures over which Mr. Beesly was toiling seemed to become positively sticky—in the sense, that is to say, of adhering to each other and refusing to be separated; while the drowsy clerk's eyelids showed an equally inconvenient tendency to droop far more than was decorous. It seemed inevitable that in another moment his rather long nose should have made personal acquaintance with the obstreperous figures, when all at once he sat up with a jerk, for the handle of the door had turned.

"Am I disturbing? Oh, it's you, Mr. Beesly!"

The head which had been thrust into the office belonged to an intoxicating little person who, owing to the angle at which a species of black crinoline flowerpot was tilted over it, could not bring more than one eye at a time to bear upon whomsoever she was addressing—which, considering the havoc which that one alone was wont to wreak upon the opposite sex, might be regarded as a providential circumstance.

The present victim sprang to his feet with an alacrity which could only be described as headlong.

"Miss Gairdner! What a surprise!—and pleasure!" he stammered, while rushing into his coat. "Pray step in. The idea of your disturbing anybody!"

"I only wanted to know whether papa is in," explained Nella Gairdner, complying with the request, and thereby bringing a wave of violet perfume, as well as a marvel of pink *batiste* and insertions, into the grim-looking office; "I mean whether he is visible to such as me."

"I shall enquire at once," said Mr. Beesly, making, however, no movement towards the door.

"I do hope I have hit it off this time. There isn't anything wrong with Canadian Trunks or Turkish Trams, or whatever the things are called, is there? I'm on my way to my dressmaker, you see, and it's a question of ordering a silk or a linen frock for the Eton and Harrow. A tremendous issue, and entirely dependent on the temper I catch papa in. I'm afraid the temperature isn't very conducive to liberality, but I can't put it off longer. I generally go to Madame Ambrosine *via* the bank, you know. It's a bit of a round, to be sure, but my 'bus fare isn't wasted, as a rule."

While she chattered away, as to an old acquaintance, her lively brown eyes were roaming towards the door, within them a shade of anxious expectation which did not quite match the lightness of her tone.

Nor, to judge from the sudden darkening of his long, narrow face, had this fact escaped Mr. Beesly's attention. It was a mere strip of a face, moderately youthful, dingy of complexion, and—save for a pair of small, dark eyes which his friends were accustomed to refer to as "intense"—unremarkable of feature.

"Thanks;—I don't think I shall sit down," said Miss Gairdner in answer to the eager gesture with which he placed a chair. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to see——"

"In one moment! You will permit me just to arrange these papers? I don't quite know whether"—uttered Mr. Beesly, obviously in no hurry whatever to curtail the *tête-à-tête*.

"Ah, here comes somebody who perhaps does know! Mr. Vogler, can you tell me whether papa is at liberty?

And will you take upon yourself the risk of introducing me into his office—by back-doors if needs must be?"

It would have been hard to say in what the tone of these words differed from those already spoken; but the hearing of jealousy is acute. As with a vicious bite to his underlip Mr. Beesly turned to the papers on his desk, his dusky face had grown perceptibly darker. Before turning, his quick eyes had not failed to note the heightening of as much of the warm complexion as was visible under the tilted flower-pot.

The matter-of-fact and perfectly unmoved tone in which the question was answered proved a further irritant, rather than a balm.

"Mr. Gairdner will be disengaged in about five minutes, so please have a little patience. I shall tell him you are here."

"And where shall I wait?" asked Nella, abruptly and unexpectedly meek.

"Anywhere you like—here, if the chairs are not too uncomfortable."

He was just turning to Beesly with what was obviously a business question upon his lips, when Nella Gairdner, recovering from her fit of meekness, spoke again.

"Mr. Vogler"—it came with a little jerk and rather quickly—"why were you not at the tennis on Saturday?"

In order to give both her eyes fair play she had to raise her chin considerably, for the difference between the two levels was no trifle. But she achieved it, thereby disclosing a face which, with its small, "tip-tilted" nose and impudently white teeth flashing be-

tween red lips, was as impossible to define as beautiful as—once seen—to put out of one's mind.

"On Saturday?" repeated Viktor vaguely.

"Yes, we were so disappointed—I mean Daisy and Lucy were. They wanted a fourth; and you had promised, you know."

"I am afraid I must have forgotten," said Viktor with despairing politeness. "Please excuse me, Miss Gairdner. I have so little room in my head for anything but business. But I shall make a note of next Saturday.—Beesly, where is that last account of Fluggins?"

"In its place, of course!" almost snapped Beesly, who, by the mere entrance of Viktor Vogler seemed to have abruptly shrunk to about half his already unimportant size.

Not that this was quite the same Viktor who had felled Blackbeard in the restaurant dining-room. The eleven years which had passed since that turning-point in his career—and incidentally in that of Max—had done their unavoidable and, so far beneficial work. "Unwieldiness" was no longer the word to apply to this splendid young Goliath of thirty, whose perfection of limbs amply made up for the irregularity of his somewhat massive features. He no longer looked apologetic when entering a room, for he had learnt to manage those limbs, aided by growing self-confidence, and unhampered, even in Nella's presence, by any touch of self-consciousness.

In point of fact, if, while taking her message to her father, he thought of Nella at all, it was only to wonder why women will wear such ridiculous hats.

* * * * *

"So it can be the *taffetas,* after all!" Nella was saying presently to her long-suffering parent, running her hatpins into his eye, meanwhile, by way of expressing her gratitude. "I knew I shouldn't have to regret my 'bus fare!"

"Be so good as to mind my eyes! If the Bank has got to be ruined by your extravagance I'll be needing them more than ever, you know, in order to start a new one. And to think that there are four more to follow in your footsteps!"

Mr. Gairdner raised his plump, pink hands, and then let them sink. Within these eleven years they had grown rather plumper, and the flaxen whiskers had bleached considerably, and seemed further apart, owing to the breadthening of the rubicund countenance. He looked more than ever like a prosperous farmer, and less than ever like the "desk man" he actually was.

"It's exactly because there are four more to come that I've got to give them a good example," argued Nella, smoothing out the lace upon her skirt. "Have you not yet grasped the fact, dad, that it's purely out of regard to you that I get pretty frocks?"

"I don't think I quite caught that."

"Yes, you did: Re-gard—for—you. That's plain, isn't it? How do you expect ever to get rid of us unless we dress nicely? People would much rather marry a fright than a frump nowadays."

"Have you got anything inside that head of yours besides clothes, I wonder?" asked the much-tried father, mopping his moist brow as energetically as though he had just been making hay instead of drawing balances.

"*Chiffons* is the word—not clothes. Every schoolboy knows that. And as for my head—who knows? perhaps I have got something else inside it; but maybe you would not approve of it any more than of the *chiffons*."

"Oh, indeed!"

Mr. Gairdner gazed rather thoughtfully into his inkstand.

"Allow me to remark that, although your time may not be valuable, mine is. I've got a lot of important things to do before luncheon."

"They can't possibly be as important as an interview with Madame Ambrosine."

"I've got an interview, too—amongst other things."

"But not with Madame Ambrosine."

"No; with Mr. Vogler."

"Oh!"

There was a tiny pause; after which Nella asked with a touch of hurry:

"What are you going to do to him, dad? Nothing bad, I hope? You are not going to scold him, are you?"

"No, I am not going to scold him; and it is something distinctively *good* which I have to say to him; something he will be very pleased to hear."

"Oh, then I am pleased too!" exclaimed Nella. And then, in a greater hurry, and grateful to the black crinoline *cloche* for hiding so much of her complexion:

"You see, I have known him for so long, and he used to tell me fairy-tales so long ago—on Sundays; so it's only natural I should take an interest in his welfare, isn't it? I'll go at once, so as to leave the coast clear."

Another dab at the paternal cheek, another thrust at the paternal eye, and the perfumed presence had whisked from the room.

For a full minute Mr. Gairdner kept his finger upon the button of the electric bell without pressing it while his eyes continued to explore the depths of his inkstand as intently as though he had just discovered a specimen of some miniature monster—amphibious, presumably—disporting itself among its sable waves.

This was not the first time he had thought to notice certain symptoms touching his eldest daughter's state of mind. Approve? Well, no doubt Nella could have looked higher; but a man with only one daughter short of the half-dozen cannot expect them all to marry swells. It was true that Viktor Vogler had been a waiter, and —for a brief month—a hall-porter; but it was equally true that, to all intents and purposes, he was a gentleman—almost an English gentleman by this time.

And then there was that vacant filial post which ever since Charlie, at twelve years old, succumbed to scarlet fever, had been waiting to be filled. Possibly the fact of Viktor being so exactly the sort of man into which he had always imagined Charlie growing, had as much to do with his liking for the young Austrian as even the black bag and the fifteen thousand pounds. And he had found this liking justified. Vogler might not be exceptionally quick, but he was a sound thinker, and an indefatigable worker; and, above all, loyal—loyal as a dog. Yes, on the whole, Nella might do worse.

Meanwhile this same Nella, passing through the outer office, and being accustomed to act first and to

think subsequently, had stretched a white-gloved hand towards Viktor.

"Oh, Mr. Vogler, papa is going to send for you; and he is going to tell you something *good*. I don't know what it is, but I should like to wish you joy in advance!"

And having said it both audaciously and shyly, she was out by another door, leaving the dense Viktor entirely unenlightened.

In an adjoining space, Mr. Beesly—once more in shirt sleeves—might have been heard muttering to himself something that sounded like: "Pearls before swine."

CHAPTER II.

THE "NAUSTRIAN."

As will be remembered, Viktor's entry into the Bank had been made in the character of a watch-dog; but, although he looked it to the life—his appearance being eminently calculated to strike terror into the hearts of loafers—he had not filled the post for more than a month. Before the lapse of that time there came a day in which a German business letter having to be read and answered, and the usual interpreter being absent, Mr. Gairdner abruptly remembered that the new hall-porter was a German—no, an Austrian.

"Fetch up the Austrian!" was the order given to the office-boy on what was to prove another of the critical days of first order in Viktor Vogler's career.

Presently the broad-shouldered youth, very red in the face, stood within the precincts of the private office

—his startled eyes fixed enquiringly upon his patron's face. What portended this summons? Dissatisfaction? Dismissal? Was this another of these tricks of Fate of which he had had such ample experience?

"Is it perhaps for that I did not yesterday knock down the vagabond?" he humbly enquired.

"No; it has nothing to do with knocking down this time. It's only a question of reading a letter. You read German, of course?"

"Certainly I read German, sir," said Viktor with a general relaxation of his facial muscles.

"Then read this, if you please; and put it into as intelligible English as you can."

As to the intelligibility of the English there had certainly been a few hitches, none of which, however, had been able to disguise the fact of an education far superior to that of the general run of ex-waiters.

"Yes—that sounds about it. And an immediate answer is made a point of? That's rather a nuisance! I suppose"—looking tentatively at the porter—"I suppose you wouldn't feel able to undertake the reply?"

"Wherefore not, sir, if you so wish it? Is not the German my mother-tongue?

"Yes. I know. But how about orthography? Are you sure of it?"

Viktor drew himself up a little stiffly.

"My father was a schoolmaster, sir, and I myself have finished the *Realschule.*"

"Oh, indeed! Then we'll risk it. So long as the spelling is orthodox it won't matter so much about the business form not being so. Of course you cannot be expected to have any inkling of that."

"And wherefore not, sir, since I attended for one year a commercial school?"

"A commercial school? God bless you, my lad! Why, your resources are positively inexhaustible! Here goes for the letter!"

The mere look of the letter, which was the result of a careful explanatory dictation, made an excellent impression upon Mr. Gairdner. This was anything but the uneducated looking hand he had feared. At sight of the firm, businesslike writing he felt that he could take the orthography upon credit. This favourable impression was further enhanced by some of the remarks made by the improvised interpreter in the course of the dictation, and which, by their nature, appealed to the banker's business instincts.

"What else have you been besides a waiter and a commercial school scholar?" he enquired, while the envelope was being closed.

"An office-boy, sir; and for a time a cashier."

"Was it not a pity to drop the commercial school?"

"That was not by choice. My father died; and my mother—"

"Oh, to be sure! You told me that before, I remember."

As a result of this afternoon's incident another hall-porter was looked for, and the present interpreter—an unsatisfactory individual of erratic habits—summarily dismissed. Mr. Gairdner, whose eye for human nature was almost as keen as for business, had recognised that a waste of good material was here going on, and within a week Viktor, instead of guarding the entrance of the Bank, found himself installed within its precincts.

Since that day his career had moved on an unbrokenly ascending line, for the liking conceived by Mr. Gairdner on the day of the black bag episode had increased upon nearer acquaintance. Above the heads of other aspirants he passed on with a celerity which could not have failed to surround the Austrian with enemies, but for the counter weight of his unfailing good nature and almost miraculous absence of arrogance. As it was, the would-be enemies were disarmed in advance, so to say—with one exception, to be sure. Borne by the wave of favour, he had now reached the much-coveted post of Mr. Gairdner's private secretary and right-hand man.

That in this good fortune Max richly participated it is almost superfluous to remark. An early opportunity had been taken to bring the fact of his existence and his needs under Mr. Gairdner's favourable attention, and so successfully too, that another place at the bank would probably have been forthcoming had not Max himself, demurring at the prospect of "drudgery," preferred the freer if more uncertain existence of a teacher of German. Even here Mr. Gairdner had proved useful by recommending him to such of his friends as possessed daughters anxious to acquire German. And it was extraordinary how many of them became anxious for this—after the first glimpse of the teacher. By this time the "Vogler Courses" were very much *en vogue* in the West-end, although naturally more patronised by daughters than by mothers, who according to the modern plan, looked on, powerless, while their excitable offspring flocked to the classes at which the golden-haired Apollo was supposed to initiate them into the mysteries of

German literature. Taken all in all, the fortunes of the Vogler brothers had reached a height undreamt of in the attic room. The past seemed buried and done with almost to the point of oblivion. Over Vienna, and that which had driven them from Vienna, the Waters of Lethe had flowed, with their merciful floods blotting out the unsightly Past. Maybe it was to make up for calamities endured that fortune strewed so many gifts upon their paths—more gifts perchance than Viktor, for one, had wit or leisure enough to perceive.

His acquaintance with Nella Gairdner was almost as old as that with the bank; for it had been during his brief appearance as hall porter that she had first come under his notice. He remembered the day quite well—though not nearly so well as she remembered it—on which, issuing from his official kennel at the sound of the swing-door going, the watchdog had found himself confronted, not by any "vagabond," but by a small person in a very much starched white frock and the gayest of blue silk bonnets matching the sash at her waist. She looked about four years old, though in reality nearly six, and behind her stood two diminutive editions of herself, all very round-eyed and apparently rather awe-stricken. Of any "grown-up" that might be regarded as an appendix not a trace to be seen anywhere.

"Are you the Naustrian?" enquired the biggest and evidently far the boldest of the three maidens, of whom each stood straight behind the other's back, thus forming a descending staircase of blue silk bonnets, while peeping furtively round each other's frilled shoulders.

"Yes: I am the Austrian," said Viktor, smiling down broadly at the small group before him, of which even

the tallest was far from reaching to his waist. "Do you want anything of me?"

There was another long moment of silent contemplation, and then the foremost maiden apostrophised her followers across her shoulder.

"Didn't I tell you that he wasn't a nigger? You see"—and she turned back towards the porter—"Dad told us that he had got a Naustrian, and we had never seen a Naustrian before, so we wanted to look at you. These girls," with a wave of her chubby hand she indicated her sisters, "were almost afraid to come; they were sure you were a nigger."

"I see. But surely you have not come alone?" asked Viktor, aghast.

The small, dark-eyed person waved her hand towards the entrance.

"No; Nana is out there with the perambulator, and Amy inside it. She said she couldn't get it in by the swing-door; so she gave us five minutes."

"They must be over now. Hadn't you better——"

"He's bigger than the other one," audibly whispered the second step in the blue silk staircase.

"That's because he's a Naustrian. Is everybody in Naustria as big as that, please?" asked the elder sister.

"Not quite everybody. But Miss Gairdner—that's your name, is it not?—I'm afraid your nurse will be getting anxious," admonished Viktor, who was beginning to wonder whether this conversation would exactly meet Mr. Gairdner's intentions, "and, you see, I have my duties to attend to."

"All right; we're going. But we'll come and look

at you again. It's very interesting. I'm glad Naustrians are not niggers. Good-bye! Come along, girls!"

And, bestowing a friendly nod upon the hall-porter, Miss Gairdner led the way out again, followed by two more blue silk bonnets and two more bobbing brown manes.

That had been the introduction to an acquaintance which in the course of eleven years could not fail to ripen considerably. Between Mr. Gairdner and the more favoured of his subordinates there existed a sort of family bond which led, among other things, to many pleasant Saturday afternoons spent at the banker's Wimbledon residence. Very early Viktor, whose position as a homeless stranger strongly appealed to Mr. Gairdner's innate good nature, had been included in this favoured band. Within a few months of that first meeting in the entrance hall of the bank the "Naustrian" had become a sort of tame cat in the Wimbledon villa —high in the favour of Nella and her sisters, who speedily developed an unquenchable thirst for fairy-tales. Among the few family relics which had survived the *débacle* of the Vogler fortunes was a battered old volume of Andersen's tales, out of which Frau Vogler, in her rare moments of leisure, had been wont to read aloud to Viktor and Max in pre-alphabetic times. By dint of hanging upon his mother's lips, and, later on, of poring over the volume, Viktor knew most of the stories by heart; which accomplishment, once discovered, settled his position as official story-teller. Many were the hours he had spent in Mr. Gairdner's rose-grown summer house, recounting the marvellous biographies of kings' daughters or tailors' sons. Visitors straying in

that direction were pretty certain, if they did not come in for the inevitable "Once upon a time" to catch such phrases as:—"And then the little mermaid said" —or "the tin soldier never moved"; while the group formed by the youthful giant and the three, four, and presently five small maidens at his feet might well, in itself, have been something out of a fairy tale.

In this way Viktor had actually seen Nella grow up before his eyes; which, perhaps, was the reason why, despite the lengthening of her skirts, he failed to grasp the fact that she actually had grown up. In vain was the brown hair puffed so decorously over her small ears; before his mind's eye it still poured as tumultuously down her back as it did down that of Daisy, Lucy, and Amy. As on the occasion of their first meeting she still appeared to him as but a somewhat larger edition of her juniors. Was it not a fact that in those far-off days she had actually taken her turn at a ride upon his capacious shoulder?—a memory which alone seemed to make it impossible for Viktor to think of Nella Gairdner as anything but a child. It was not even so very long ago that she had stopped calling him "the Naustrian," and but a few years back that she had confided to him how deeply her mind had been exercised on this point.

"You see," she explained on that occasion, "I wasn't at all sure whether Austrians weren't a sort of Australians, and I didn't like to ask, for fear of appearing stupid."

"Then, despite the haughty rebuke to your sisters, I suppose you were half prepared to find me a nigger, after all," suggested Viktor. "I hope it wasn't too much of a disappointment?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't a disappointment," said the twelve-year-old Nella, speaking rather more reflectively than was her wont. "If it was anything, I think it was a—discovery."

But it was only quite lately that Nella had learned to give the right name to that discovery.

CHAPTER III.

THE "SOMETHING GOOD."

JUST as there are eventless weeks and months and even years, so are there days on which events seem to trip upon each other's heels. So this day of Nella's visit to the bank. Viktor had not been puzzling his head for more than two minutes over the possible meaning of her announcement when the door of the office opened once more, and once more upon a vision.

"Max!" he exclaimed with brightening eyes.

And indeed Max was a sight to brighten eyes—not only fraternal ones. In the well-grown, faultlessly attired youth whose close-cropped golden head was crowned by a chimney-pot of mirror-like perfection, the wearer of a certain overcoat of evil memory was still recognisable, though transformed by maturity as well as by prosperity. Maybe English air had agreed with him so well only because upon English soil he had always had enough to eat. Anyway there was only enough trace of delicacy remaining to maintain the refinement of the face, which, from that of a cherub, had developed into that of a seraph—or, at any rate, of the popular conception of seraphs—and which, with a proper

appreciation of fitness, Max always kept immaculately shaven. Small wonder that maidens, both romantic and sentimental, flocked to the German Literature classes, small wonder that Viktor's eyes rested with infinite satisfaction upon the brother whom he could not help regarding as a little his own work and creation, though of late, to be sure, fate seemed to have relieved him of the burden which beside his mother's deathbed he had so resolutely shouldered.

"What is it, Max? There's good news written upon your face!"

In reply Max threw his well-clothed arms about his brother's neck, not so stormily as he had been wont to do in the attic room, but not less warmly.

"Better news than you can possibly imagine, Viktor! She says she will have me!"

Whereupon Viktor was stupid enough to ask:

"Who?"

The fact being that, among the many "she's" to choose from, it was difficult on the spur of the moment to make the right selection; for—needless to say—the triumphal progress of the young German teacher had been both enlivened and complicated by "affairs of the heart" well nigh as uncountable as the sands of the sea. If there had been intervals during which Max had not been in love, Viktor failed to recall them; certain it was, at any rate, that there never had been one during which somebody had not been in love with the expounder of German literature; the various worshippers as well as idols being very naturally recruited from the ranks of his miraculously diligent pupils. Many had been the avowals heard between these four

grim walls, many the plaints poured out in face of these gaping pigeon-holes.

All this only by way of apology for Viktor's dense: "Who?"

To-day, after a little preliminary indignation, the walls echoed only to jubilant accents. The idea of Viktor not leaping instantaneously to the right conclusion! As if there could possibly be a question of anybody but Clare Reeves!—ever *had* been a question of anybody but her—in a *serious* way, of course. Oh yes—there had been other things, but mere "flirts," all of them, while this was the real thing—no possible mistake about it.

"And you're actually engaged?" gasped Viktor, recognising the name of the latest goddess, whose praises he now remembered having recently heard sung.

"Right and tight!—Why, you haven't wished me joy yet, Viktor!"

"With the parents' consent?" asked Viktor, still lost in amazement; for the goddess's father was a fashionable surgeon, who had made his reputation by amputating the leg of some foreign prince mutilated by an anarchistic bomb, and since then had been much in request for carving up Royalties and titled people generally. No doubt Max was *unique,* but so was Sir William Reeves, in his way. So much good fortune had almost the effect of a blow upon the head.

"Consent and blessing and anything else you want! It was almost more than I had ventured to hope," admitted Max with charming candour. "There was a resistance of course, but it was brief, though sharp,—exactly as Clare had predicted. She told me from the

first that she could do what she liked with them. Since she's been in the nursery they've never been able to refuse her anything—beginning with sugar-plums and dolls and ending with—oh, Viktor, my necktie!"

For now, Viktor, recovering from his stupor, was folding his brother in his arms with more vigour than regard for detail.

"It's almost too good to be true!" was all that he could think of repeating, even after they had both sat down. "It's almost too good to be true!"

And really it was so,—not only because of that half-million which Sir William was supposed to have already carved out of high-born limbs, but also because he had heard Clare Reeves referred to more than once—and by other people than Max—as almost a professional beauty.

"When am I to make my future sister's acquaintance?" he asked, seized by unavoidable curiosity regarding the girl who had shown such marvellous aptitude for having her own way.

"To-day, of course. You don't suppose, do you, that I could sleep another night without displaying her to you? Oh, Viktor, you'll be dazzled, I tell you—dazzled! I've got her photo here, though it doesn't do her half justice."

He pulled a cabinet photograph half out of his pocket, and then pushed it back again.

"No—I won't show it to you. It will be more overwhelming the other way; and I want you to be overwhelmed."

Presently it was settled that as soon as feasible after banking-hours, Viktor should call at Max's rooms, duly attired for the presentation visit.

"She expects us towards six. Mind you're not late, Viktor!" Max was urging, when the person who had just been closeted with Mr. Gairdner, and who sported a goat's beard and wore trousers that had certainly not been made in London, came out of the inner office, while simultaneously the electric bell rang shrilly.

"I'm wanted, Max. As soon after five, then, as I can get along!"

And with a hurried pressure of hands the brothers parted.

As Viktor entered the banker's private room he was still smiling to himself at the thought of Max's happy face. No personal expectation moved him. The news he had just heard had quite swept from his mind Nella's enigmatical words.

It was something in Mr. Gairdner's tone that recalled him to his own affairs.

"Why, Vogler,—you look almost as though you were in possession of the facts. Do you know who that was who went out just now?"

"No, sir—I do not."

"An American capitalist who means to invest money in our new Continental houses. We've just perfected the arrangement. You remember that we're setting up another German branch?"

"Of course I remember."

"We shall be needing trusty men to head these branch houses, you understand—men who are masters of the language. For the new French houses I'm suited: and as for the German—" he paused a moment, evidently for dramatic purposes—"I've made my selection as well, —and the name of the person selected is Viktor Vogler."

His blue eyes were twinkling in anticipation of the effect to be produced.

It came fully up to his expectations. The tone in which Viktor uttered: "Me? Do you mean me?" was amazed almost to the point of imbecility.

"Just so, my young friend! I won't deny that I hesitated over it—not from any doubts as to your abilities, but because I feel a certain difficulty in separating myself from you—something like amputating one's right hand, you know. It's a personal sacrifice that I am making—that's what it is—but the interest of the bank goes before everything. I owe that to my clients."

There was actually a slight moisture about the blue eyes as he said it.

"You accept, I suppose?" he asked as Viktor still stood tongue-tied before him. "It's at Hamburg that the new house is going to be opened."

"I accept and I thank you, Mr. Gairdner, from the bottom of my heart. I shall try and prove worthy of your trust. That's all I can think of saying."

"And quite enough, too! Your hand, Vogler!"

There followed a brief business talk, in the course of which the figure of a salary was mentioned which could not but further elate Viktor's already elated spirits. Truly a golden day this, in the Vogler annals!

Presently, having in the exuberance of his heart told Max's joyful news and received Mr. Gairdner's heartiest congratulations, Viktor went off to keep the appointment made—joyfully expectant, blithely unaware of the fate he was hurrying to meet.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SNOW QUEEN.

UNDER Viktor's feet, as he hurried along, the burning pavement seemed to have turned to clouds. It was with the gesture of a conqueror that he hailed the 'bus at the corner. In his veins there ran a new fluid—so it seemed to him—lifting him far above mere paving-stones. Every nerve in his body tingled with an excitement that was all pleasure and no pain. A Bank Director at thirty!—and Max betrothed to the girl of his choice, and, by this very act, delivered of all material cares! Ah, if she who had closed her eyes on that dreary October night could have seen this day, how would the lines of care have been smoothed from her fine-grained forehead!

Vaguely Viktor observed that most of the faces in the 'bus were highly flushed and rather cross. He supposed it was about the hottest day of the season, although he had hitherto been too busy to notice it. It was past five and no coolness had yet fallen; and now that this fact had penetrated to Viktor's consciousness it seemed as though the burning state of the atmosphere was adding its item to this new fever in his blood.

When, after a visit to his lodgings, and suitably

attired, he at length reached Western regions, it was to find Max prancing about his room, hat on head and rose in buttonhole—the impatient lover to the very life, although not forgetful of the mirror at each one of his passages.

"At last! She must be waiting by this time. Let's be off!"

"Not until you have heard my news, Max; for I, too, have something to tell you."

And Viktor brought out a tabloid edition of Mr. Gairdner's announcement.

"It means separation for us, of course," he finished, as for the first time the sole drawback of the situation presented itself to his mind; "but I'll be able to afford myself lots of trips. Are you glad, Max?"

"I'm overjoyed, old man—positively overjoyed!" said Max, warmly grasping his brother's hand (an embracement would have been too detrimental both to the rose and to the exquisitely disposed tie), but speaking, nevertheless, with a certain want of emphasis which clearly betrayed whither his thoughts had flown in advance of his person. "I'll be able to present you to Clare as an embryo Bank Director—that will make a positively thumping effect; sounds ever so much better than secretary, even with the 'private' tacked on. Oh, yes—I'm awfully glad. But do let's get along! I want to see you opening your eyes."

Not a word touching the separation. One tiny little stab Viktor was conscious of, but quickly got over it. After all, he must learn to realise that he could not remain as indispensable to his brother as he had been

before the advent of Clare Reeves. His commonsense told him that.

At the door of the house in Grosvenor-place something like awe fell upon Viktor. To know that Max's future father-in-law was a semi-millionaire was one thing; to brush against the concrete proofs of this fact —in the shape of an orthodox butler, and of a lobby which was no lobby but an entrance-hall—was quite another. It was almost bashfully that Viktor crossed the threshold, on the heels of his self-assured brother.

"The Misters Foggler!" announced the orthodox one, opening wide a door.

On a much-cushioned sofa half-way down the long room a rolling movement became visible as Lady Reeves half rose to receive her guests, but subsided again, with her object unachieved.

The renowned surgeon's wife was a round, rosy, and slightly greasy-looking person, apt to make imaginative people think of a suet dumpling over which a pink sauce has been plentifully poured. To-day, thanks to the temperature, the dumpling was rather greasier than usual and rather shakier, too. Hence the abortive attempt at rising. It was not from here that Clare had got her good looks—this much was clear to Viktor even before he had reached the sofa. Nor was it from this side that resistance to the lovers' desires could have been forthcoming—this his second conclusion as he met the inane, round-eyed gaze.

"Clare will be so pleased to make your acquaintance." Lady Reeves was saying with limp amiability, as she gave Viktor a hand which felt like dough to the touch.

"Where is she?" burst out Max, whose eyes were exploring the room.

"In the conservatory—watering the flowers. She loves her flowers, you know."

At the far end of the long room a door stood open to what seemed a sunlit bower of fairy greenery. Upon Viktor another touch of awe descended. A conservatory here, in the very heart of London, and no miniature conservatory either! Instinctively the business man within him began to calculate the probable cost of its upkeeping.

"She will be here directly," assured Clare's mother. "Won't you——"

But Max was already half-way to the conservatory door. A meeting in that green bower seemed to suit him down to the ground.

He had not yet reached it when the open door was filled with a vision—a light-haired, bare-armed girlish vision, holding white skirts carefully gathered around her.

If Max had wanted Viktor to be dazzled his wish was fulfilled to the letter. Positively, while looking upon the white vision sight seemed to fail him for one brief moment, as it fails those foolish people who attempt to stare at the sun. He could distinguish no details—receiving only a general impression of perfect and marvellous fairness. Upon the brooding heat of the room she and her diaphanous white draperies seemed to dawn like the very spirit of refreshment. Perhaps it was by this very force of contrast that she put Viktor in mind of the "Schnee-Königin"—the "Snow Queen" of those Andersen tales which he knew so nearly by heart.

But already the betrothed couple were close—hand in hand.

"This is my brother, dearest!"

Through the buzzing in his ears Viktor heard the words, while mechanically, he inclined himself. He felt her hand within his own—a hand as cool and smooth as satin—not by any means a hand whose touch should have made one shudder; and yet, as he clasped it, Viktor shuddered under the shock of some hitherto unknown emotion.

In the half-heard murmur in which he caught something about "My brother too" he could think of no possible rejoinder.

"You will pour out the tea, will you not, Clare?" suggested Lady Reeves.

"Not until I have changed my skirt, mamma"—how like the tinkling of the Snow Queen's silver sleigh-bells did her voice sound in Viktor's ears! "I stupidly brushed it against one of the big pots, and I could not drink my tea with a green stain upon me, could I?"

With a charmingly playful smile and a backward glance at her betrothed she vanished, still carefully holding her white draperies out of possible harm's way.

"Clare has a perfect horror of stains," Lady Reeves explained, half-apologetically. "She is so particular; some people even call her pedantic."

The maternal laugh evidently aimed at being jocose, but succeeded only in being vacant.

A small episode, yet one which Viktor was to remember later on.

Speedily Clare reappeared, more spotlessly white than ever, and, with her satin-soft hands and a delicious

circumspection of movement which was typical of her personality, dispensed the tea.

Now that Viktor's eyes were growing accustomed to the light he realised that her face was of the same satin-smoothness as her hands and her hair of that palest of gold upon which a ray of winter sunshine seems for ever to rest. Her transparent grey eyes were more bright than soft, but whenever she looked at Max something happened to them which turned them into the semblance of stars—of stars shining on a brilliant though perhaps slightly frosty night. In manner she was stately rather than familiar, which matched her queenly bearing to perfection. It was not until the news of Viktor's advancement in life had been explained to her by Max that she began to take more particular notice of her future brother.

"That will be quite a nice position, will it not?" she asked, looking across at Viktor with a new attention. "And in time, no doubt, you will rise higher still."

"Perhaps; if I continue to enjoy the favour of my chief."

"I am sure you will do that," said Clare graciously. "The favour you at present enjoy speaks volumes in itself."

So confused did Viktor feel by the approval in both words and eyes that instead of looking proud he hung his head like a schoolboy.

Upon Lady Reeves likewise the words "Bank Director" seemed to have a magical effect.

"You don't say so! You don't say so!" she kept repeating between gulps of tea, her round eyes hanging meanwhile upon Viktor's face, as though upon a newly

discovered object of wonder, and rather to the detriment of the horizontal position of her tea-cup.

"Take care, mamma," admonished Clare, "you are dripping tea upon your skirt."

"Even baronets are bank directors sometimes," observed Lady Reeves as she put her cup into safety. "But it's a pity Hamburg is so far away, is it not, Clare?" she added, as a further upshot of her reflections.

"Yes—that really is a pity," agreed Clare, bestowing upon Viktor a smile which gave the final touch to the "overwhelming" process. "We shall be able to see so little of you."

Every word and every look made it evident that both to the mother and to the daughter any improvement in the impending "connection" was extremely welcome. One does not live with impunity in a circle in which "Position" stands on an even higher pedestal than does Money.

The quarter of an hour that followed was one of mixed sensations for Viktor. While laboriously making conversation with Lady Reeves he could not keep his eyes from straying across the tea-table. The wrapt expression in Max's face did not astonish him. To be looked at by a woman of that sort in that way must surely be the very crown of existence. Strange that this idea had never before struck him.

It was a relief when an electric brougham glided past the window and a moment later Sir William entered the room.

"Ah, that is where she got her looks from," it shot through Viktor's mind as he caught sight of the tall,

silver-haired figure. There were the same clear grey eyes, the same regular cast of feature, and apparently the same faultless deportment. A few more pounds of flesh would have ranged Sir William among the "heavy fathers," but, thanks to his shapely waist, he was only stately instead of being pompous—and affable beyond the power of words to express.

Upon him, too, the news of Viktor's rise in life made a visibly favourable impression.

"Very glad, indeed, to have made your acquaintance," he graciously and emphatically declared while measuring Viktor with a glance of paternal benevolence. "Came very near to missing this pleasure for the present, since I am off to Dover by the night mail."

"So you are going to operate Prince Cyprian, after all?" asked Clare, looking admiringly at her father.

Sir William gave a decorously slight and charmingly resigned shrug of his well-clad shoulders.

"No escape from it, my dear. The merest trifle," he explained, turning to Viktor; and went on to speak of a certain royal infant whose tonsils were to be extracted and whose mother would entrust this yet so simple operation to no one but Sir William.

"Mothers take these sort of ideas into their heads, you know," the renowned surgeon remarked indulgently —"even royal mothers. You would be astonished if you could see how like to other women they are in all essentials," he added, in a semi-confidential tone, and with the air of imparting to Viktor a personal discovery of his own.

"Oh, I quite understand her Majesty's feelings," murmured Lady Reeves, deep in her third cup of tea.

"It shows that she is a woman of sense," decided Clare, with her bright eyes upon her father. "Who would have their children's tonsils cut out by anyone but papa—so long, that is to say, as they can afford it."

Sir William shook a long, white finger at his daughter, and then turned, smiling, to Viktor.

"Confess that if I am not conceited my merit is immense! A blind admirer in one's own household is a terrible snare to the most modest of men."

"Oh, not blind!" protested Lady Reeves; "Clare always knows what she says."

"Well, if not blind, then wearing rose-coloured spectacles, let us say; though, to be sure, it requires a stretch of imagination to see spectacles of any colour upon that face—eh, Max?"

And with his fine head a little to one side, and the particular smile of satisfaction he was wont to wear after a successful operation, the great surgeon contemplated the inheritor of his own good looks.

"Talk of snares to one's vanity!" laughed Clare, colouring ever so slightly under the paternal homage; "surely it is I who am in danger of becoming conceited at this rate."

It could not help being clear, even to Viktor, that father and daughter formed between themselves a sort of mutual admiration society, fervent both in sentiments and in words.

"By rights, I should be on the other side of the channel by this time," explained Sir William; "but at the last moment I was delayed by another tiresome little business."

"One of the Royal Family, perhaps?" suggested Lady Reeves as casually as she could achieve.

"No," said Sir William, helping himself to bread and butter with something of his daughter's marked circumspection of movement. "Quite the reverse, I might almost say. I don't know if you happened to read in the papers"—this to Viktor—"of the case of the Duchess of Marchdale's scullery-maid, who jumped out of the window of the second storey because she had been accused of stealing a sapphire ring?"

"I read about it," put in Clare. "The duchess was just starting for the Drawing Room when the ring was missed."

"Well, she escaped with a compound fracture of both knees; and the dear duchess actually begged me to undertake the setting. I could not well refuse, much as I regret having to keep her Majesty of Ruthenia waiting. But for a doctor, of course," added Sir William with admirable effrontery, "class differences do not exist."

"Of course not," echoed Lady Reeves, her conviction doubtless strengthened by the reflection that it was, after all, a ducal scullery-maid who had been the cause of the delay.

"All the same, I fear the girl will remain a cripple for life," observed Sir William in his smooth, perfectly even voice. "Her Grace is dreadfully cut up about it."

"Poor thing!" breathed Lady Reeves, though it was not quite clear whether she meant the scullery-maid or the duchess.

"Hard lines to be falsely accused," threw in Max, by way of a polite contribution to the conversation.

"If she had been falsely accused! But the strange part of the story is that when they undressed the girl in the hospital the ring was found upon her, wrapped in a scrap of newspaper and stuffed inside her stocking."

"Then what did she jump out of the window for?" asked Clare, opening her transparent grey eyes wide.

"Perhaps because she was ashamed of herself," suggested Lady Reeves, with a bright idea.

"Well, of course, she had some reason to be that; but I fancy that people who steal rings are not generally given to being ashamed of themselves."

"There were extenuating circumstances," put in Sir William dispassionately. "Something about a disabled mother and a hungry batch of juniors. I always, upon principle, avoid investigation of these points, as I find my hand is steadiest when all disagreeable impressions are eliminated; but I could not help catching some remarks to this effect."

"In that case stealing sapphires would be not much worse than stealing bread," put in Viktor diffidently. "She can only have meant to turn them into bread—for feeding those hungry juniors."

"And do you find that stealing bread is defensible?"

Under Clare's straight and earnest gaze Viktor felt himself colouring like a boy. It was with an effort that he steadied himself to reply:

"Not defensible, perhaps, but comprehensible—up to a point."

"That would be as much as saying that honesty is a merely relative term."

"I sometimes think that it is; or, at any rate, that

there are different categories of thieves, just as there are different degrees of temptation."

Clare drew her fine brows together in a frown of perplexed reflection.

"That is not the way it strikes me. Is it not exactly the temptation which is the test? You are either honest or dishonest, and opportunity does no more than reveal you."

If the tone was a trifle didactic, Viktor, though conscious of a sudden sinking of the heart, was too lost in admiration of the flash in her eyes to observe it.

"Clare has so fine a feeling in these things," put in her mother, perhaps vaguely aware that, from lips of nineteen, the words struck somewhat too uncompromising a note. "She would have everything unblemished."

"Oh, she is right," stammered Viktor; "so would I; but I have been through hard times myself, which perhaps makes me too lenient."

A pause of embarrassed silence followed upon his words. At sight of the deepening of his hostess's complexion, as well as of the passing frown upon Sir William's brow, Viktor understood that he had been guilty of an indiscretion, almost of an indecency. Was it not clear and palpable that what the Reeves family desired most was to forget that he had ever been anything but a bank director? And here he had been stupid enough to allude to such distasteful subjects as past poverty!

"I—I can't help being sorry for the girl," he stammered, by way of making matters better, and merely for the sake of ending the pause.

"Oh, I am sorry for her, too," conceded Clare.

"One can't help being sorry for those natures that have no resistance in them; but, all the same, I would not engage her for a scullery-maid even if she got well again."

"It mightn't be safe, on account of the tea-spoons," laughed Max, with a nonchalance which struck Viktor with astonishment.

Sir William was looking at his watch. For him that chapter was closed. The next one opened with Prince Cyprian's tonsils.

"You have the same fine feeling as Clare, I see," began Lady Reeves, gazing approvingly at her future son-in-law.

"It is not a *fine* feeling, mamma; it is simply what I imagine to be the feeling of every honest-minded person."

In deep trouble Viktor listened. "If she knew!" The thought passed through his mind like the thrust of a knife, while for one brief moment the Waters of Lethe seemed to part, disclosing that which lay at their bottom. He looked across at his brother. Had the troublesome thoughts which oppressed himself really not so much as touched Max? Apparently not? His enthusiastically riveted eyes very plainly proclaimed that he was not thinking of the past, but only of the present.

This was another of those moments which Viktor was to remember—later on.

CHAPTER V.

TENNIS—AND AFTER.

It is probable that Viktor had never even heard of such a thing as a *coup de foudre,* but this could not alter the fact that he had fallen its victim.

Late that night in the solitude of his modest bedroom he understood at last what had happened to him. There was no blinking facts. He had been seized with a hopeless passion for his brother's betrothed wife, and was conscious, above all else, of a deep feeling of guilt, as of a deliberate treachery.

It was a fact that, until to-day, women—in the higher sense—had appeared to Viktor chiefly as something quite apart from practical life, a sort of unattainable luxury, to which he might perhaps one day be in a position to give his attention, but which for the present could find no place in his day's work. For the growth of sentiment his early struggles had been too severe; while the ardour with which of late years he had striven to prove himself worthy of Mr. Gairdner's confidence had, by diverting his energies, effectually smothered any other sort of ardour which might have attempted to stir. Which reserve of strength only served to make the inevitable catastrophe more overwhelming.

Was it the electricity with which the atmosphere of

the Golden Day had been charged that was responsible for the misfortune—the new fluid in his veins which had been so prompt to take fire? Would every beautiful woman have produced this same effect upon him at this particular juncture, or was it the paradoxical apparition of a Snow Queen in the heart of summer which had been his undoing?

Vain speculations! since the harm was done—Max's foolish wish as to the overwhelming of his brother fulfilled to the letter.

What now was the next thing to do?

In his methodical, businesslike manner Viktor set himself to face the situation.

The first necessity, of course, was to strangle this unhappy passion, or, at the very least, to disguise it. And the method to achieve this end was again, of course, to shun Clare Reeves. Not quite easy this, since already Max, in the innocence of his heart, was pressing him to accept the invitation to dinner received for the Saturday to come. Fortunately, Saturday was the Gairdners' tennis-day, which he had positively promised to attend, so that he could plead an excuse, which, however, failed to satisfy Max. Thanks to the time-tables, tennis at Wimbledon was no obstacle to dinner in Grosvenor-place, he argued—with such success that Viktor ended by conditionally accepting the invitation. They must not wait for him on any account, must not even reckon with him, but if the tennis finished at a reasonable hour he would try to look in—at least for dessert.

So for Wimbledon he started, dutifully striving towards it as towards a safeguard, in the company of Mr. Gairdner, whose face positively seemed to grow

rosier in measure as they left the streets behind them. In these semi-agricultural surroundings he always appeared so much more appropriate than in his office, just as he was undoubtedly a happier man with a spud or a pair of pruning scissors in his hand than when holding either pen or ruler.

* * * * *

"Take three ounces almonds, the same weight of sugar, flour, and butter," read Nella Gairdner aloud from out of the cookery book in her hand.

It was Saturday forenoon, and the eldest Miss Gairdner, her morning frock covered by a coquettish white apron which, far from extinguishing her charms, rather enhanced them, and flanked by Daisy and Lucy, was busy in the kitchen—to the very qualified delight of Eliza the cook. But Eliza was too wise a woman to attempt resistance. These acute attacks of domestic virtue were familiar to her of old, and were apt—as she knew to her comfort—to be mercifully brief. To all appearances they formed the sole counter-weight to the "frills and furbelows" over which Mr. Gairdner was accustomed to shake his head, and habitually seized upon Nella with a sort of remorseful strength whenever she had been spending more than usual upon either her own or her sisters' clothes.

"After all, if I teach you both to dress and to cook, I don't think anyone can say that I have neglected your education," she had explained more than once to her juniors. "To make herself look nice and to feed her mankind nicely comprises, to my mind, a woman's chief duties."

From which it will be seen that Nella was far from

being abreast with the modern conception of womanhood.

It had been by way of salving her own conscience that she had insisted on going through the cookery school course of which the results were such a trial to the long-suffering Eliza. For in the matter of her sisters' education Nella felt herself entirely responsible, despite the presence in the house of a certain Miss Jerrum, generally known as "Pussy." "Pussy" had been the last of Nella's own governesses, and was still supposed to be superintending the education of the younger members of the family—was in fact at this very moment reading English history with Amy and Aggie upstairs. When, on her deathbed three years ago, Mrs. Gairdner had implored Miss Jerrum not to abandon her children, Miss Jerrum had not had to think twice before giving the promise required. For "Pussy" belonged to that brand of governesses for whom the demand has ceased, and who are not able to teach their pupils more than good manners and about as much history and geography as it was "polite" to know a quarter of a century ago. Beside the new make of strenuously educated and much-examined teacher she was about as efficient as would be an oil-lamp beside an electric globe. Mrs. Gairdner's last request had, therefore, been to Miss Jerrum as good as an insurance against starvation. But it was not for this reason alone, or even foremost, that she had so readily agreed; the real reason being that she had long ago folded all her five pupils into her rather foolish but immensely capacious heart.

Certainly Mrs. Gairdner must have been either a very short-sighted or a very far-sighted person to have

confided her children to so naive and unimportant a guardian as was this antiquity of a governess. There was absolutely nothing to remark about her except that she seemed to possess no nerves—not even during piano lessons—and had never been known to be "cross." She also possessed an unlimited capacity for listening, which, with five lively tongues wagging around her, came in useful. "That old fossil will never be able to manage such a handful of girls" had been the general verdict of the family's friends. Without Nella's vigorous support it is doubtful whether "Pussy" would have managed; but Nella having after her mother's death decided that her fourteen-year-old energies must in future be devoted to the government of the house, and that consequently her own education be considered as ended, had so completely identified Miss Jerrum's authority with her own as greatly to simplify matters. When scoldings became necessary it was always Nella who administered them, these being things which lay beyond "Pussy's" grasp. But they did not often become necessary: the comically pained expression upon "Pussy's" circular face being generally sufficient to disarm the rebel. Upon extreme occasions tears had been known to rise to her eyes, with the paradoxical result of having to be remorsefully kissed away and the representative of authority hugged back into cheerfulness by the very person upon whose head the bolts of her judgment should have fallen, but never did.

On the whole the arrangement had worked quite well, relieving Mr. Gairdner of a load of responsibility and consequently of trouble, and although the dressing up of "Pussy" into a presentable appearance on those

occasions when her presence as chaperon was considered desirable added another to the various toilette problems already occupying Nella's mind.

But just now these problems were in abeyance.

"Three ounces of almonds——"

"Let me bleach the almonds!" interrupted Lucy. "I love to feel their skins slipping off."

"These are the Austrian cakes, aren't they?" remarked Daisy. "That means that Mr. Vogler is coming. They're his favourite cake, and you always make them when he comes, Nella—deny it if you dare!"

Daisy, who was at the lanky stage of adolescence, just as Lucy was at the podgy stage, looked at her sister with a wicked little gleam of understanding in her eyes—brown eyes like Nella's own, only smaller and sharper. Both girls had the same blunt little noses as Nella, tilted only at slightly different angles, and down both their backs there tumbled the same class of brown mane which Nella had finally put up barely a year ago.

"Why on earth should I deny it?" said Nella with a successful assumption of dignity. "I always try to give our guests the things they like best."

"Then you should have a pile of Russian sandwiches for Mr. Beesly, and a mountain of strawberries for Mr. Calcott—you know that is their pet food."

"We always have a mountain of strawberries, as you know, and of course we shall have Russian sandwiches, but Eliza can manage these without us; can't you, Eliza?"

"Which I rather think I can, Miss," grimly assented Eliza, looking in vain for an unencumbered spot upon which to place a steaming pot.

There passed a few minutes filled by the vigorous thumps of the sugar-pounder which Daisy was wielding, and then, in a merciful pause in the din, and Eliza being occupied at the other end of the kitchen, Lucy's voice became audible:—

"Nella!"

"Well?"

"It's a pity, isn't it, that Mr. Vogler is going away—and so far too! After all, he was very useful for the tennis, even though he doesn't play as well as Mr. Beesly."

Nella frowned a little as, with sleeves rolled up to her elbows, she bent over the dough she was kneading.

"What's the use of talking of things that can't be helped? And besides, it's a great rise for him, so of course one must be glad."

"But I'm not glad!" protested Lucy, with the frank selfishness of extreme youth. "He is much nicer than all the others, and I'd much rather he stayed here."

"I don't believe Nella is glad either," suggested Daisy, whose fifteen years had intuitions unknown to Lucy's thirteen; "not really glad—quite at the bottom."

"That would be egoism," decided Nella with a slightly heightened colour. "Of course one is sorry to lose an old friend like that, but one must be glad—for him—all the same. I mean to be glad, at any rate. You'll just see how I'll wish him joy this afternoon!"

And as though in emphasis of the resolve, Nella squeezed the dough so tightly that it seemed likely to turn into a cannon-ball in her hands.

When the moment for uttering the good wishes had arrived Nella, despite a certain heaviness in the region of the heart, kept up the same brave front.

"You know now what the good thing was that papa was to tell you!" was her resolute greeting. "And you are glad, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course I am glad," agreed Viktor, a trifle mechanically. Beside the *coup de foudre* even his good fortune had lost in importance.

"You will be going away soon?"

"To be sure—so I will!"

He said it almost as though struck by a new idea. It was of Clare Reeves he was thinking, and of the distance which this would put between her and him—salutary, no doubt, but, ah—so bitter!

In Nella's mind, too, the threat of separation was looming as large and as bitterly; but Viktor guessed nothing. Blinded by the image of Clare he looked into Nella's eyes without clearly seeing them. And yet they were to-day both fully visible, since the necessity of catching balls rules out the tilted flower-pot. If Viktor in any way observed these eyes lifted towards him it was only to remark how much more lovely grey eyes were than brown ones. Nella's want of height, too—the irregularity of her features, could serve only to furnish unfavourable comparisons with Clare.

"It will be almost like going back to your own country," she observed, with a touch of wistfulness.

"Oh, no it won't. I have never been in Hamburg."

"Oh, yes—it was Vienna you came from. What a pity the new house is not to be in Vienna!"

"Not a pity at all!" said Viktor, almost vehemently. And then, seeing that he had astonished her, added in a studiously lighter tone:

"Even Vienna would not feel to me like the same

place now, nor I myself like the same person there. I left it as a waiter, you know."

"I know. And you would be going back as Bank Director. It is a transformation scene, isn't it? It makes me think of the fairy-tales you used to tell us long ago:—that one about the tailor's apprentice, for instance, who ended as a Prince. I always liked that one so much—almost as much as the Tin Soldier!"

"I like the 'Snow Queen' better, I think," said Viktor, gazing past Nella right across the tennis-ground, as far as the brick wall would let him.

"I'm not sure that the 'Ugly Duckling' wasn't my favourite, after all. Papa was rude enough to nickname me after it—so long as my hair was down. Only the end does not tally—unfortunately; for the Ugly Duckling turned into a swan, you know, and nobody has ever attempted to call me a swan."

She said it with a laugh that was more shy than coquettish; for although Nella's talents in that direction were by no means despicable, she somehow never could manage to flirt with Viktor.

"No, I suppose not," he said in the same absent-minded fashion, and quite unaware of the enormity he was committing.

"I thought we were here to play tennis, and not to tell fairy-tales," Mr. Beesly's voice was heard close at hand.

Owing to his smooth movements and lithe step, he had a way of surging up at a person's elbow with a remark so appropriate as to provoke the question as to how much of the conversation he had already absorbed.

"Is not one as good a pastime as the other?" said Viktor carelessly; and Nella could almost hear him add: "for little girls."

She knew right well that, in his eyes, she was massed with Daisy, Lucy, and the others, and, under this knowledge, her woman's pride smarted.

"It was but an excursion. Let us come back to earth!!" she said, with laughter in her voice, but in her eyes a suspicious shimmer which Mr. Beesly noted though Viktor did not. Angrily, by way of easing her feelings, she tightened her hold upon the racket in her hand. A little girl! Would she always remain a little girl in his eyes? She, whose heart had already awakened to a woman's love! Would he who had awakened it continue for ever to pass her by in this inattentively good-natured fashion? Nella asked herself the question with a wrathful glance downwards at her white tennis skirt, whose orthodox shortness and scantiness, by displaying her trim ankles, made her look more than ever like a slight variation of Daisy.

During the hour that followed, Mr. Beesly had his own little triumph, since Viktor—never a match for his quick movements and keen eyes—was to-day in particularly bad form. It was not a question of games or sets which occupied the Austrian, but a question of whether he was to take an early or late train back to town. There was still time to make use of the conditional invitation. With inclination and duty pulling him in two different directions, what wonder that he should miss uncountable balls?

At the end of that hour a new thought struck him:

Perhaps, after all, it had all been a delusion and Clare Reeves was not really so beautiful as she had seemed to him the other day. He was conscious of having been in an abnormal frame of mind. Perhaps if he took another, more deliberate, look at her he might be cured. This conclusion reached, he seized the first opportunity of laying down his racket. Duty and inclination had at last been induced to pull in the same direction; and they pulled hard.

Mr. Gairdner, coming along opportunely, spud in hand, was accosted by stammered excuses which he began by meeting with blank incredulity.

"Eh, what? Got to get back to town before eight? God bless my soul. You know as well as I do that the tennis always lasts beyond eight. This won't do at all. Here Nella! Just listen to this! Mr. Vogler pretending that he has got to leave us!"

"He sha'n't go! He sha'n't go!" came a clamorous chorus of the juniors, while Nella said nothing, but suddenly lost her bright colour.

"It's an engagement to dinner"—insisted Viktor rather feverishly.

"You shouldn't have made it"—asserted Lucy stoutly, while Amy and Aggie settled the matter in their own way by each taking firm possession of one of the Austrian's arms.

"There's his hat on the bench—hide it away, Lucy, and then he can't go"—directed Amy with true strategical insight.

"I really don't think that this is quite fair upon us, Vogler," said Mr. Gairdner in a slightly aggrieved voice. "Not many more Wimbledon tennis-parties, mind—for

you, I mean. I should have thought you would have wanted to make the most of them."

He was glancing in Nella's direction as he said it, and not afraid of doing so openly. Though not a conceited man as men go, the possibility of Viktor declining the honour of becoming his son-in-law had never so much as occurred to him.

But Nella herself, though her lips were somewhat tightly compressed, gave no sign. All her energies were at present directed to banishing expression from her face, and this chiefly because she was quite aware of being under Mr. Beesly's closest observation.

"I am very sorry"—protested Viktor, eager only to be gone;—"and without a pressing ground I should certainly never have thought of—; but it is Lady Reeves to whom I gave the promise—my brother's future mother-in-law, you know, Mr. Gairdner; and just because my time here is so short, Max is anxious that I should become better acquainted with the family."

"Is it *the* Miss Reeves he is marrying?" enquired one of the standers-by.

"The daughter of Sir William Reeves."

"Lucky beggar! I've only seen her photograph, but it is quite enough to bowl one over. I'd have gone in for her myself, in your place. Why leave all the prizes to the younger brothers?"

"The elder brother is surely to be envied too"—observed Mr. Beesly, with studious quiet—"since he is acquiring so beautiful a sister."

If Viktor's complexion, somewhat heated by exercise, deepened at this moment, it is not likely that anyone

observed it, except perhaps Nella, who just now stole a quick look into his face.

"But why need he choose just a Saturday for improving his acquaintance with her?" asked Mr. Gairdner, still slightly aggrieved. "Saturday is our only day, while for Lady Reeves—the week has, presumably, seven days."

Here, unexpectedly, Nella interfered, speaking for the first time, and rather precipitately.

"Don't worry Mr. Vogler, dad! Don't you hear that he has promised? and of course one has to keep one's promises. Drop that nonsense, girls! and fetch Mr. Vogler's hat. Keeping a person prisoner against his will is certainly not my idea of hospitality."

The tone was one which both Amy and Aggie knew, and to which they were accustomed immediately to submit; and yet there was something in the tone which they did not quite know—a new note which they were fortunately too inexperienced to identify as personal bitterness.

On the wings of impatience Viktor flew back to town.

When late that night he reached his room again he knew that he was not cured. It had been no delusion, after all. Clare Reeves was all that memory had pictured her—and even more. Once more he had seen her in white—her favourite attire, seemingly—the glorified white of a dinner-dress, revealing the most perfect arms and shoulders ever seen out of dreams, and sparkling with crystal beads; more like a Snow Queen than ever and more deadly fatal to his peace.

How was this to end?

"Yes,—it is good, it is good that I am going away!" he kept repeating to himself, as full of conviction as of anguish. With the cold sea waves rolling between them, with new duties and amid new surroundings, he might perchance succeed in stifling this unholy passion which had shot down upon his life like a bolt from the blue.

Next day, being Sunday, he did what he had not done for long;—and, going to the nearest Catholic Church, searched in his heart for those prayers which he had learned at his mother's knee, in the old Vienna days. To his own astonishment he found them again, —overlaid indeed by the dust of years, encumbered by the material needs of every day life, and yet alive still and answering to the first call, though, in a faint and far-off voice, like that of some being living miraculously under ruins.

"I want to be loyal to Max,—I want to!" was the burden of the petition which he sent up to that God for whom he had had no particular use of late years, and to whom yet, seeing himself confronted by a task which he knew to be beyond his own strength, he turned instinctively.

"I want to be loyal to Max! Show me how to do it!"

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE PAST.

On the Monday morning Viktor awoke filled with grim resolution.

By the time Mr. Gairdner—rosier than ever after his week-end—reached the bank the private secretary

was already hard at work. With a cheerful nod the banker passed into the sanctuary. Viktor glanced at the clock. He had some questions to ask, but Mr. Gairdner always required at least twenty minutes to get through the Monday morning's post which Viktor had just ranged upon the writing-table. Among the letters he had noticed one with a German stamp;—some communication concerning the new branch, of course. There had been many such lately.

When the twenty minutes had passed without the accustomed summons coming Viktor began to grow restive. Work, as he knew, was his one safeguard, his one chance of killing thought, and he could not work until he had got the directions he required. Again he looked at the clock, and twice got up and sat down again. It was not until a full half-hour had passed in this way—quite an unusual interval—that he decided boldly to invade the sanctuary.

The first thing that struck him on catching sight of Mr. Gairdner was that he was looking much less rosy than he had done on his first appearance this morning. He was sitting before his writing-table, apparently unoccupied—another unusual circumstance—and the gaze which met Viktor's seemed almost vacant.

"Are you ill, Mr. Gairdner?" asked Viktor, alarmed by something in the face before him.

The answer came shortly and rather impatiently.

"No, I am not ill; but please leave me; I don't wish to be disturbed."

Wonderingly Viktor retired.

What had come over his usually so urbane patron? Could his own early withdrawal on Saturday have hurt

him to this point? But no—his first greeting had been as cheerfully friendly as ever. The explanation must lie elsewhere.

Viktor was still puzzling over this point when the electric bell screamed suddenly in his ear; and once more he entered the inner office. At a glance he saw that Mr. Gairdner had regained his composure, though not his colour. Also he was conscious of being looked at with a keenness he had never before met in the kindly blue eyes. It was almost as though the banker was looking at him for the first time.

With a deliberate gesture, though a somewhat unsteady hand, Mr. Gairdner handed him an open letter.

"Read this," he said, in a voice not quite his own.

In blank incomprehension Viktor took the sheet, and instinctively began by glancing at the signature:

"Friedrich Bäumel."

He had to think for nearly a moment in order to remember that that was one of the names that belonged to the Past—the dead and buried Past. Or could it be—

As he turned back to the first line he could feel the blood retreating from his cheeks, and apparently taking the direction of his hard-hammering heart.

"BERLIN, *July 3rd*, 19—.

"ESTEEMED SIR!

"The reception of your letter acknowledging, I honour myself by assuring you of the perfect readiness of my firm to undertake the furnishment of the one thousand reams of best textile paper which you require to be delivered at Hamburg by September 1st. Also I

flatter myself that the quality of the goods will find so much favour in your eyes as to secure for us in the future the continued patronage of your new establishment.

"The business point being thus bespoken, I should wish to allow myself a question of private nature.

"The name of the future director of your Hamburg house I find given as 'Viktor Vogler.' Remarkablewise this is a name familiar to me—in no pleasant fashion. A young man of this name was arrested in Vienna, where I likewise possess a business, in the year 189- for the stealing of an overcoat—by him not denied—and with four weeks of prison punished. I would have the trivial circumstance not remembered if it were not for his younger brother being at the time the teacher of my son—though naturally dismissed in the moment that the elder's disgrace to my ears reached. I make the assumption of this being a chance, and that more than one Viktor Vogler exists; yet as one business-man towards another, do I feel myself bound to direct to the circumstance your attention.

"With hopes that you will my defective English pardon.

"I have the honour of remaining

"Your obedient servant,

"FRIEDRICH BÄUMEL."

The writing was eminently legible, yet Viktor seemed to have some difficulty in deciphering it. With bent head he pored over the page—the thought of gaining time uppermost in his mind.

So it was true then what some people said—that

nothing ever really dies. The treacherous Waters of Lethe had rolled back for good this time, and, rising from its grave beneath, the Past was grinning its death-head grin at him across close upon a dozen years. Chiefly he was conscious of the necessity of collecting both his faculties and his forces, in order to meet the danger.

He had not collected them yet as in silence he handed back the letter. In so doing he could not but meet Mr. Gairdner's gaze, and read therein the dismay, of which he knew that the cause must be written upon his own face. It was with a genuine and poignant anxiety that the blue eyes regarded him.

"Your answer?" said the banker at last, low but urgently. "Of course it is only a coincidence, I am as sure of your honesty as of my own. All I want is your word that you are not the Viktor Vogler spoken of here. I ask for no further proofs."

He paused, but Viktor's lips moved no more than though they had been held together by a strong glue.

This second silence lasted no longer than about a minute, but to both the men it seemed an hour: and the thoughts, the speculations, the emotions which within that space tore through Viktor's soul might well have filled more than an hour.

One word—no more than that was wanted to clear himself, to see the trust return to the kindly blue eyes of his patron—but the price of that word would be Max's happiness. Although he had only seen Clare Reeves twice, Viktor knew for certain that she would rather let her heart break than marry a man whose Past bore the stain that Max's bore. Had she not an

almost morbid horror of stains, whether upon her skirts or upon human morality?—and could he forget how his heart had sunk at her scornful denunciation of "relative" honesty?

Save himself without exposing Max?—this was the speculation that followed—only to be cast aside. He could trust Mr. Gairdner's discretion, but not Herr Bäumel's. Once having stumbled upon the clue, that righteous business-man would no doubt consider it his duty to follow it up to the bitter end. No hope in that direction.

And then a new and frightfully delicious thought visited him unawares—the possibility—the bare possibility—if Max were out of the running—of gaining the Snow Queen for his own. Like an armed assailant on a defenceless man the temptation fell upon him. Under its shock he felt himself trembling from head to foot. Then swiftly, as though a defender had shot from the skies, in order to tear him out of the grip of temptation, there followed another thought:

In robbing Clare of Max he would be destroying not only his happiness but also hers—for that she loved Max he knew by that star-like lighting up of her eyes. Was he to extinguish that light, on the bare chance of being able to console her?

All that was noble, all that was faithful in him—and that was much—rose in rebellion at the thought. No—he could not sink so low as that; for in his manhood no more than in his boyhood had egoism any part.

It was to his mother that he had sworn to stand between Max and the evil things of life, and yet at

this juncture neither his mother nor Max were as anything. It was not the delicate, care-worn face that rose before his mind's eye now, as it had done in the earlier crisis, but the satin-smooth face of Clare Reeves.

And all this within the confines of a minute.

"Your answer!" said Mr. Gairdner again, and this time his voice seemed half extinguished with suspense. "Tell me that you are not that man!"

Then, with a supreme effort, Viktor unlocked his lips.

"I cannot tell you that, because I am that man," he said dully but distinctly, with something of the numb feeling which had weighed him down while he stood in the Viennese police-station.

But at sight of the consternation in Mr. Gairdner's eyes some band broke within him, the numbness was swept aside by the passionate desire of achieving at least some measure of self-justification, by pleading extenuating circumstances. This surely he could do without betraying Max. The wish for the esteem of this man to whom he owed his rise in life, who had been his patron—and more than his patron—for so many years—came over him like a torturing thirst.

In words whose burning eloquence took himself by surprise, he burst into speech,—portraying the situation in which the brothers had been left at their mother's death, relating the struggles that had followed, dwelling upon Max's delicate health, on his susceptibility to the cold,—telling the story of the overcoat handed by mistake and the temptation thus presented—the true story, in fact, with only himself substituted in place of the real

culprit, and with youth and irreflection put forward as excuses.

He was fighting for the conservation of that confidence which he had enjoyed for eleven years.

Mr. Gairdner sat, elbow on table, his eyes shaded by his hand, listening without interruption and without movement.

Fallen silent at last, Viktor stood with hammering temples and labouring breast, awaiting his verdict. As the shielding hand fell he knew that he had not spoken altogether in vain,—for on the banker's disturbed countenance it was not condemnation that stood written.

Nor did sternness ring in his tone.

"Thank you for your openness. I cannot answer you at once: you must give me time. By to-morrow morning I shall be able to tell you—my decision. Until then not another word on the subject. We must go back to business for the present."

He spoke slowly, almost laboriously, as though searching for the right expressions.

Of reproach not a word, nor of indignation in the eyes that met his; but so great a pain that Viktor felt pierced to the soul.

"Leave me now, please," said Mr. Gairdner quietly; and Viktor inclined his head mechanically and found his way out of the office more by the force of habit than by the aid of sight,—almost running against Mr. Beesly, who, armed with a bundle of papers, stood apparently waiting for him.

"I beg your pardon," said Viktor vaguely, for his blind movement had knocked the papers out of the other's hand.

"No matter," came rather hurriedly from Beesly, as he stooped to recover his goods. At the same moment, Viktor, too, instinctively stooped with the inevitable result of a collision.

"Your head is decidedly harder than mine," observed Beesly, ruefully rubbing the sore place, and grinning rather strangely as he did so.

He was standing upright now, a little flushed—by the stooping, doubtless—and with the papers again in his hands.

"And yet it isn't always the iron pot that survives longest in real life,—however it may be in those fairy-tales you are so fond of,—I have some papers for Mr. Gairdner," he added, in another tone, conscious of Viktor's blank stare.

"Mr. Gairdner can speak to no one at present. Leave them here."

Beesly's lips twitched, as though he had something more to say, but evidently decided not to say it,—for the present. Instead he laid the papers on the table and vanished noiselessly from the room.

Then at last Viktor fell into the chair before his desk, as exhausted as though he had just emerged from some severe physical exertion.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STEPCHILD OF LIFE.

THE sensations with which Mr. Beesly regained his office were mixed—not to say chaotic, yet, on the whole, very pleasurable.

It had been a pure chance which had taken him to the door of the inner sanctuary, but anything but a chance which had held him fast there, nailed to the spot by a sudden and sinister fascination, as irresistable as might be hypnotism. There was no need at all to have recourse to the key-hole, though in the intensity of the curiosity which possessed him Mr. Beesly might conceivably have stooped even to this. A craned neck and an ear inclined at the best sound-absorbing angle was all that was required; for Viktor's voice, raised in the warmth of his impassionate appeal, took no heed of listeners. True that, even with the craned neck, it was not possible to catch more than scraps of sentences, for the door was massive; but what Mr. Beesly did catch was amply sufficient to tell him that this was unmistakably a speech of self-defence. Such expressions as "youthful delinquency," "pressing poverty," "overwhelming temptation," all seemed to point one way. Also there was something about a sentence of four weeks, as well as the mention of the paper firm with which, as he knew, negotiations were being conducted for the supply of the Hamburg House. Whatever was happening just now in the sanctuary was therefore probably connected with the letter whose German stamp had not escaped his notice—as indeed few things did—even before attracting Viktor's.

Now, in his own office, while seemingly busy balancing columns, he was in reality trying to put together the fragments he had gleaned; straining all his faculties in order to join them to an intelligible whole, much as people strive to fit into each other the bits of a parlour "puzzle game." With so many pieces awanting,

the result could not be perfect; but even these scanty materials argued loudly of some dark spot upon Viktor Vogler's past. With this theory, too, the look upon Viktor's face as he came out of the inner office tallied completely. How secure the missing pieces to the puzzle? This was the question with which one portion of Mr. Beesly's brain was subconsciously busy, while, automatically, another part of this same brain added up figures.

Undoubtedly the letter with the German stamp was the point upon which attention should be concentrated. This fact once grasped, the determination to get knowledge of its contents followed inevitably; and with a grimness of purpose which made mince-meat of anything in the shape of a scruple. The motives which pushed him were of the deep-seated, elementary sort, not to be stopped by conventional considerations, or even by niceties of principle.

The subconscious portion of his brain having been at work for a few minutes longer, Mr. Beesly decided that lunch-time was his best—in fact, his only chance. With Mr. Gairdner's habits he was intimately acquainted, and upon them based his hopes. He knew that the banker's frank confidence in those around him was apt to modify even business caution; also that in moments of agitation this caution was apt to be yet further relaxed, his chief being, as he was well aware, anything but invulnerable to emotion. Of his agitation to-day even the few tones of his voice which had penetrated to Beesly's ears were proof enough. Patiently he waited for the luncheon hour; and the luncheon hour came, sending Mr. Gairdner to the same restau-

rant in which he had met Viktor Vogler, and Viktor to another and humbler eating-place, and emptying the office of all but a couple of clerks and of the caretakers. Virtually, Beesly had the place to himself, and would have it for almost an hour. That is to say, if Nicholls were disposed of; for Nicholls always ate his humble luncheon on the premises, and in his character of "office-boy" had a tiresome habit of prowling about the premises and putting things "straight"—so he called it—before the return of business hours. Decidedly so ubiquitous a personage would be better out of the way; and a little reflection pointed out to Mr. Beesly the easiest manner of effecting this.

To a person instinctively connecting youthfulness of appearance with the term "office-boy," the appearance of the individual who answered Beesly's bell would probably have been a shock. At the start of his career under Gairdner and Co. he had presumably been a genuine "boy," but, as that had been thirty years ago, few people remembered him as such. At the present moment he was rather nearer his fiftieth birthday than his fortieth, and displayed a face which had somewhat unkindly been likened to a patchwork quilt, and which, at any rate, with its red nose, green eyes, purplish cheeks, and badly shaven yellow chin, and with the lines of both wrinkles and a few odd scars crossing and re-crossing each other, presented a certain analogy to the article. Until lately he had possessed a wife, who—according to eye, or rather ear-witnesses—had possessed a tongue, and had certainly kept a tight hold of the month's wages. Since her death, observers affirmed that the brilliancy of the

patchwork quilt had visibly increased, the crimson of the nose and the purple of the cheeks deepening gradually, and a certain chronic inflammation of the eyelids threatening to become acute. Although he had never been seen downright drunk—as indeed the mild but incorrigible "tippler" rarely is—it had nevertheless been represented to Mr. Gairdner that Nicholls could no longer be considered as either an ornamental or a particularly useful addition to the staff, and that a smart and genuine office-boy would be so very much more in accordance with the spirit of the age. And yet, despite his watery eyes and shaky hands, Nicholls remained on, a living monument of Mr. Gairdner's good-natured leniency, or possibly only to his dislike of a change.

"Nicholls," said Mr. Beesly, with brisk decision, "I have some important correspondence and no time to go out, so just fetch me a couple of sandwiches from across the road; but in double quick time, mind, if you want to make it worth your while."

Then, when Nicholls, after a miraculously short interval, returned with full, though rather unsteady hands and expectant eyes:

"Here, catch this!" ("This" was a shilling, which Nicholls of course failed to catch, but grabbed up greedily from the floor.) I've a fancy for having my health drunk. Plenty of time to do it before business hours. It's not more than half a dozen steps to the 'Brazen Herring' is it?"

"No—that it ain't," grinned the "office-boy" with an extremely eloquent wink, "and if it wern't for having to put things a bit straight——"

"Bless you, they are quite straight already! No need to worry about that. I'll see that no bits of paper are lying about, and that's all Mr. Gairdner cares about, you know. But unless you hurry up——"

There was no need to emphasise the warning, Nicholls being already on the farther side of the door.

It was now only that Mr. Beesly felt himself master of a clear coast.

Although the chances of any sort of untimely meeting were almost *nil,* he nevertheless armed himself with a sheaf of papers which, at a pinch, might serve as an explanation of his presence, and thus safe-guarded boldly invaded the sanctuary.

His first eager glance flew over the vast writing-table, to fasten upon the huge leather blotting-book. After a moment's hesitation and one more glance towards the door, he began with furtive haste to turn its pages, only to meet half-sheets of note-paper, with here and there a row of figures jotted down. Then each of the massive paper-weights was lifted in turn, disclosing nothing but bills, bills, and again bills. As he put down the last of them his eye fell upon the paper-basket and hung there, fascinated. Paper-baskets, as he knew, had played a weighty *rôle* in the Dreyfus case, as well as in other similar "affairs." After all, it was just conceivable——

This time his hesitation was longer; for somewhere in the back of his mind he actually was ashamed of what he was doing, though not the less determined to do it, all the same.

As, with a spasmodically resolute gesture, he bent over the paper-basket a faint tinge of red was staining

his sallow forehead. And the effort had been useless, after all. For it was a Monday morning paper-basket, purged of last week's dregs, and having barely swallowed a few insignificant crumbs of the fresh meal.

Flushed with vexation Mr. Beesly straightened himself, and, in so doing, caught sight of the linen coat in which Mr. Gairdner was accustomed to transact the morning business in hot weather. Before the start for the *Restaurant* it had been exchanged for more suitable attire, and now hung upon a peg barely visible in the far background. But to Mr. Beesly's "intense" eyes everything was always visible.

Without taking further time for reflection—indeed a glance at the clock had showed him that too few of the precious minutes remained to be wasted upon scruples—he strode towards that far corner, with a new hope in his mind. In another moment his hands were exploring the pockets. Ah, a crackle of paper! Blessed sound!

And now he held Herr Bäumel's letter in his hand, and having—just as Viktor had done—first looked at the signature, turned back to the beginning and read through the contents, in flying haste. After which, for a moment, he stood transfixed; then went through the letter a second time, more deliberately; finally folded up the sheet with minute care and restored it to the same pocket from which he had taken it.

As unnoticed as he had entered he left the office, and, having reached his own, began by carefully writing down name and address of the letter-writer, which he had firmly imprinted upon his mind.

No one, unless he looked straight into his strangely

shining eyes could, from his outward demeanour, have gathered that this man was feeling positively dizzy with excitement. He himself was almost alarmed at the intensity of the feeling—so much so that even alone in the room he dared not give audience to the tumultuous thoughts that were surging through his brain. Once abandon himself to them, and he knew that he would not be able to keep up even the outward show of absorption in business. They must wait until he had reached the haven of his lodgings, where, behind a locked door and secure from intruders, he would be at liberty to think over the tremendous discovery made and above all to consider the best way of utilising it.

As it was, that afternoon taxed his self-control to the utmost; and could only be got through by avoiding the private secretary as far as circumstances allowed, and when addressed by him, carefully keeping his eyes fixed upon the papers he was busy with, for fear of the other catching sight of that triumphant light which he knew must be blazing in his eyes.

Never had Mr. Beesly so sighed for the hour of release as he did on that day—never arrived so breathless at the door of his shabby lodging, situated in a street which not all the glory of summer could make otherwise than dingy. His latchkey shook in his hand as he put it into the lock, and it was almost blindly that in the gloom of the passage he groped for the handle of his own door. To turn the key was his sole care, before sinking into the well-worn armchair which formed the chief luxury of the apartment. It was in the shelter of its arms that for several years past he

had been accustomed to brood over things in general—chiefly over the wrongs which Life had done him.

It may be conceded at once that these wrongs were not purely imaginary. Symbolised as a personage it might almost be said that Life is like to an unjust parent who distinguishes between children and step-children. The children are not spared the rod—ah, no!—but besides the knocks they get caresses—while the stepchildren get nothing but the knocks. And Cornelius Beesly was unquestionably to be counted among the stepchildren of life.

His first misfortune—perhaps the root of all the others—had been a joyless childhood. He who has not that store of happy memories to start with which home affections provide sets out upon the road of life heavily handicapped. Now, all Beesly's early memories centred round an overburdened and consequently extremely irascible uncle, and an incredibly parsimonious aunt, who both obviously regarded him in the light of a burden, and lost no opportunity of conveying to him this impression, whether directly or indirectly. The facts of his mother having died in child-birth and of his father having drunk himself to death in consequence, were, even before he had attained the age of reason, talked of in a way calculated to make him feel vaguely guilty. The want of attractiveness about his appearance as well as the defects of his character were treated of in the same brutally frank fashion, with the result that Cornelius, who at that time still said his prayers, on several occasions seriously asked the Deity what it could possibly have been about when it created so useless a person as himself. But this did not by any means

signify humility; it only signified bewilderment, which presently developed into bitterness and into deep-seated envy of his better-favoured, better-situated cousins. They were both his elders, and both very much his superiors in physical strength, so that common prudence counselled keeping the envy carefully masked. In this way he had learned to dissimulate, and necessarily also to cringe, since any small scraps of pleasure which ever came his way could only come through the favour of either Philip or Walter. That he had learned the lesson so easily was doubtless to be attributed to those defects of character already mentioned, but which—lacking the opportunity—might possibly have died in the germ. Unwittingly Philip and Walter had furthered their development, for, normal and consequently brutal young animals as they were, they had naturally not neglected such splendid opportunities for playing the bully. Beside their florid and flaxen-haired boyhood it had scarcely required their mother's pointed remarks to make Cornelius feel a very foil—like some dingy and insignificant little beetle at the side of two brilliant butterflies. Had any single person been there to whom the beetle was not dingy—a mother of his own, for instance—then Cornelius would probably have become an altogether different individual. As matters stood, bitterly aware as he was of his own unattractiveness, even of his own moral meanness—for, even as a boy, he had been able at moments to look at himself from the outside, so to say—and with no one to help him cultivate self-esteem, it was unavoidable that he should become ever more unattractive and ever meaner. Such rough moral treatment as he had received must result in making a boy

either abnormally thick or abnormally thin-skinned, and Cornelius, for his misfortune, developed the latter attribute. Under the continual rebuffs his inborn sensitiveness increased instead of decreasing, automatically deepening the envy of the stepchild for the favoured children of life.

When, at the earliest possible moment that he could decently do so, his uncle had got rid of him by making the most of the fact that Cornelius's unhappy father had been a schoolfellow of Mr. Gairdner, this envy was unavoidably transferred from his brilliant cousins to other handier objects. In first line to Viktor Vogler, of whom he had begun to be jealous even before he had fallen in love with Nella, though to be sure, he could not quite remember that such a time had been. The devotion of the sallow-faced clerk for the dark-eyed child was in fact quite as old as that of that same child for the Austrian. Both had grown up with Nella herself. Her face and her smile had been almost the only bright things which had as yet come into Beesly's life, and, like a drowning man catching at a straw, his poor starved soul had gone out to her. Ah, if it were possible to gain this dazzling creature for his own, then indeed there would prove to be some sense in having been born; then, for the sake of her esteem, he might even succeed in hoisting himself onto a higher moral level. And because Nella's infantile heart was tender and apt to be sorry for anyone who looked lonely, and because smiles always came to her readier than frowns, it had seemed at moments as though the dream might come true.

Then across it had fallen Viktor Vogler's shadow,

slowly but surely blotting out the sunlight. Beesly had begun by hating Viktor merely for his superior size, his greater bodily strength, the higher favour he stood with his chief. From the moment he had discovered in him his rival—even though an unconscious one—this hatred had become a frenzy. But to brood over means for his undoing had been but an ungrateful occupation, so hopeless did the undertaking appear.

To-day, suddenly, unexpectedly, a weapon had been placed in his hand. No wonder he had felt dizzy with the greatness of a joy that was almost a fear—because of the deadliness of that weapon. How use it without wounding himself?

This he asked himself chiefly because he distrusted his own temper, which, forcibly controlled though it usually was, would nevertheless at moments—usually at critical moments—flash out inconveniently, his nerves being as sick as his moral nature. Should he let things take their natural course? Leave the matter to Mr. Gairdner, who surely could not wish to keep a convicted thief in a position of confidence? A brief reflection ended with a shake of the head, for Beesly distrusted Mr. Gairdner as a judge—more still as an executioner—and was jealously aware of the genuine affection existing between his chief and the private secretary. He would give him a little time, of course; but the necessary steps not being forthcoming, he would take matters into his own hands. And meanwhile he must possess himself of the weapon completely and rightfully—in a fashion, that is to say, which might at a pinch, be openly acknowledged. He had already remembered that his cousin, Walter Beesly—now a flourishing

engineer—had recently accepted a Viennese post. Although correspondence between them was almost *nil,* he would probably not refuse to find out for him the truth of the overcoat story, which could be done by an application to the police. A hint dropped to the effect that Vogler's disgrace would probably mean his own advancement would help to quicken Walter's zeal, since the one bugbear of both his and Philip's life was the fear of Cornelius falling to their charge.

Yes, he would write to Walter at once, and in the proper manner.

"And when I have the answer—the *right* answer" —exclaimed Beesly aloud, suddenly emerging from the depths of the armchair, in order to shake his lean fist at the ceiling, "ah then, Austrian, beware!"

What exactly he would do was not in the least clear to his own mind—only that it must be something that should prove the detested man's undoing, unless, indeed, the force of circumstances had not by that time undone him already.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITHIN THE BOSOM OF THE FAMILY.

WHEN next morning, soon after the opening of the Bank, the electric bell rang in Viktor's private office, he arose, bathed in a cold sweat, aware that his fate, which for twenty-four hours had been hanging in the balance, was about to be decided. Since this time yesterday nothing but the strictest business remarks had

passed between his principal and himself; even their eyes had met only in cursory glances.

But now it was squarely facing him that Mr. Gairdner sat awaiting his private secretary, upright in the writing-chair, to which he had given a slight turn towards the door.

He waited only until that door was closed before beginning to speak.

In slow, laboured, yet steady tones he told Viktor that he had been considering the matter they both knew of,—had been thinking it over all day yesterday, and most of the night as well, and trusted he had come to the right conclusion. This conclusion—and he must regretfully tell him—made the proposed appointment impossible.

He had no words of condemnation to utter, scarcely even a condemning thought, for he knew from personal experience what the pressure of poverty meant, having himself endured it in his far-off youth. He was ready to make every allowance for a youthful impulse, and even to honour the motive, which had been no other than fraternal solicitude; but, however leniently he might personally judge the case, the hard-and-fast fact of those four weeks' imprisonment remained. The name of Viktor Vogler was down on the Viennese police books, whence nothing and nobody could remove it, therefore it could not stand at the head of the Hamburg banking-house. This was not a question in which personal feeling could be allowed to come into action. His first duty was to the Bank, and to those who trusted the Bank. Even with the danger of discovery eliminated his conscience would protest against the appointment.

"And that the danger of discovery exists we know by this," he said, indicating the letter which lay spread upon the table.

"You will believe me, I think, when I tell you that I have not reached this conclusion without much pain," he added, still speaking with slow deliberation, "for, in spite of all, my trust in you is not shaken. And the proof of it is that I intend to keep you about me,—to make no change in your present position. Some pretext shall be found for appointing another director, while you remain my private secretary. Here, where nothing is known, the credit of the Bank cannot suffer from your presence. I know that I am risking nothing, and that that youthful transgression is something detached from your real moral life, something sprung from the tyranny of circumstances, and having no root in your nature. I have only to add a promise of absolute discretion, and one single reserve to make: so long as the matter lies only between you and me you remain in your present position; should, however, through some unforeseen accident, the truth transpire, I shall feel myself forced to part with you,—but this is an accident which I do not apprehend. As for this letter, I had meant to destroy it, but I prefer that you should do so yourself."

He stopped, blinking his eyes rather hard.

For all reply Viktor, who had barely drawn breath while he listened, abruptly relapsed into the habits of his native land. Without a word he seized the plump, pink hand which was holding the fatal letter towards him and pressed it fervently to his lips.

Then turned and went out quickly, for fear of disgracing himself by a burst of unmanly tears.

They would—had they fallen—been tears of relief, since, in the very first moment, relief stood uppermost. It was by small degrees only that this sentiment was sucked down into a very whirlpool of mixed feelings, out of which presently there emerged a new, and, at the first, shapeless dread. Closely examined it unmasked itself as the fear, almost the terror, of what Clare Reeves would say and what she would think when told of the loss of his appointment. The loss itself he could have borne easily. Beside the escaped danger of losing Mr. Gairdner's confidence and with it his present situation, it almost disappeared. Neither was it without its consolations, since it meant continued intercourse with Clare. Ah, but how would that intercourse now shape itself? It was that alone that mattered. That the news of his advancement had distinctly raised him in her estimation had not escaped his notice: would not the news of his virtual degradation lower him in the same measure? After having been looked at so approvingly by those clear, grey eyes it would be dreadful indeed to read censure in them. Before his excited fancy the fact of the inevitable announcement loomed like an approaching ordeal. The only way of modifying its terrors would be by using Max as an intermediary, making him the bearer of the ill-news, and thus escaping that first look of displeased astonishment which he could so easily picture upon the flawlessly fair face. Yet the announcement to Max was another sort of ordeal and one of an infinitely more delicate,—of a frightfully intricate nature.

For that Max should be kept in ignorance of the real reason of the change of plans was a necessary part

of that sacrifice which Viktor, once having made up his mind to it, had embraced with an enthusiasm verging on fanaticism. Would Max be duped by the lame story about business necessities, which he would have to make up, in order to explain Mr. Gairdner's change of front? Would not conscience, soothed by years of security, awake, in order to point her finger at the real cause? And if she did——

Viktor's brain refused to think out the rest of that possibility; but in the terror that Max should see too clearly, there was lurking somewhere in the holes and corners of his soul a hope that was far too ashamed of itself to come into the open day.

But this part of the ordeal proved lighter than anticipated.

When with palpitating heart and in awkward words Viktor had told his tale, the very tone of Max's first exclamation amply showed the absence of all danger of discovery from this side.

"That's a real pity! What can have come over old Gairdner? But I say, Viktor, it is a nuisance, because of the Reeves. Can't imagine what they'll say to it."

Clearly he was annoyed; but quite as clearly not in the least alarmed. Conscience, lulled into yet deeper sleep by the love-hymns in the air, had not so much as turned over in her soft bed.

"Yes, I'm afraid they won't like it, and I'm particularly sorry because of you, Max. I was so glad to be a creditable sort of brother."

"Oh, bother that! Clare took me without the 'creditable brother,' as you call it. But still you know,

Viktor, you must have played your cards pretty badly to have got put off in this way."

He looked across at Viktor almost wrathfully.

"Perhaps so," said Viktor, with clumsy but heroic humility, and carefully evading the look. "I am no diplomat, you know. And that is one reason why I would much rather leave it to you to break it to them. You'll know ever so much better than I how to put a favourable complexion on the thing."

"Do your dirty work for you, in other words?" broke in Max still wrathfully. "No thank you, Viki! It's you yourself who have got yourself into this mess and it's you who must get yourself out of it. I'm always delighted to be the bearer of good news; but surely you might know me well enough to know that I've no aptitude for being a Job's messenger."

"Then I must tell her—I mean, I must tell them myself?"

"Of course you must, and to-day too! There's no use in putting it off; and, in fact, it's extremely awkward for me not having things cleared up. I'm on my way there now, and you just come straight along! Good gracious, Viktor—if your face gets much longer it will positively disappear into your collar!"

The laugh into which Max burst irresistibly showed that, for him, the seriousness of the situation was already dispersed.

"*Vorwärts,* my brother! I'll be there to lend you a helping hand, you know: but it's you who must open the attack."

Then Viktor resisted no more; but followed Max into the street, passive as a lamb being led to the slaughter.

At sight of Clare's face, and under the sisterly pressure of her hand, his courage almost failed him. To make matters worse, the family was, to-day, complete from the first; since Sir William, newly returned from the successful extraction of royal tonsils, and tea-cup in hand, was snatching a moment of rest from his labours. He seemed to have brought back a fresh provision of affability from the Continent; and under its application Viktor writhed guiltily. It was to the future bank director that this amiability was addressed, and on that same fortunate individual that Lady Reeves was lavishing broad smiles. Of this Viktor was aware, although he could not be aware of the importance of the subject in the eyes of the entire family, nor guess how sweet a balm to smarting social pride had been his projected rise in life.

In vain did he look for an opening through which to introduce the dreaded subject; more vainly still, in his own heart, for the courage to introduce it. Once or twice he looked towards Max imploringly; but the mere angle of Max's head and the direction of his gaze was enough to tell Viktor that both he and the impending announcement were already forgotten, and that, prisoner once more in the magic circle of his happiness, his thrice-blessed brother had lost acute interest in everything that lay outside it.

It was not until a direct question of Sir William's drove him into a corner that Viktor, with the sensation of having his back to the wall, blurted out the truth.

"I suppose that, at any rate, your start for Hamburg will not take place before your brother's wedding?" the great surgeon had remarked with a graciousness

that was well nigh overwhelming. "We should all be extremely disappointed not to be able to welcome you as a guest upon that occasion."

"I—I am not starting for Hamburg," said Viktor between two agonising gulps of tea.

"Ah? A postponement?"

"No, a—a change of plans."

"But not a permanent one, I presume?"

"Quite permanent—so far as I know."

Sir William, carefully and with due regard to the table-cloth, put down his cup of tea which had just been replenished, while Lady Reeves, transfixed into immobility, with the tea-pot in her hand, gazed round-eyed at Viktor.

"Do you mean that the idea of the Hamburg House has been dropped?"

"No, it has not been dropped, but——"

"*You* have been? Surely that is not what you meant to say?" broke in Clare, whose ears, despite the sweet nothings being whispered into one of them, were far quicker than those of her infatuated *fiancé*.

"Dropped is far too strong a word," remarked Max, rising to the necessities of the occasion. "But it remains a fact that old Gairdner has changed his mind."

"How does that come?" asked Clare, raising her delicate eyebrows in displeased astonishment.

"An alteration of business arrangements," explained Viktor looking hard into the depths of his tea-cup. "It suits him better to keep me here."

"So you won't be a bank director, after all? You just remain his private secretary?"

"Just that," stammered Viktor.

"In my opinion," pronounced Sir William, "your chief had no right to offer you the post unless he saw his way to carrying out the offer. False hopes are always bad form."

"Dear! dear!" breathed Lady Reeves, at last putting down the tea-pot. "It really *is* hard upon you!"

"Confoundedly selfish of Gairdner, I think," put in Max. "It's clear he hates the idea of starting a new secretary."

"That certainly speaks for the present secretary's qualities," and Sir William graciously inclined his head in Viktor's direction. "But all the same—all the same——"

During the general and somewhat bewildered discussion that followed, and although Sir William showed no lessening of affability—this quality being ingrained and consequently invulnerable to accidents—Viktor became vividly conscious of having lost in value as a "connexion." Sir William's gravely courteous treatment of the subject conveyed the impression quite as plainly as did Lady Reeves's rolling movements on the sofa, not unlike those of a ship in distress. In the direction of Clare he dared not look, for fear of having unfavourably to interpret the silence which had fallen upon her. It was a silence which appeared to him more ominous than her most pointed remarks had done, and which probably heralded the apex of the ordeal.

Nor did he guess wrongly. For presently, sure enough, as the result of some undetectably feminine engineering he found himself substituted for Max in one of the two chairs which stood, in comparative privacy,

at the farther side of the tea-table, and obviously on the point of being confidentially catechised.

This, then, was the moment before which his whole soul had trembled—under whose closeness even his body was now actually though invisibly trembling.

"I want you to tell me what has brought this about?" began Clare, scrutinising him with her clear, keen eyes, "for I can't say that I quite understand your explanations. There must be something more than you say."

"Business explanations are not quite easy to follow," said Viktor lamely, pressing one of his big hands hard within the other.

"Oh, I could follow what you said well enough; but it didn't sound convincing, somehow. For instance, I know enough about business to know that business men are not much in the habit of changing their minds. Mr. Gairdner seems to be an exception to the rule."

"I don't think so—at least he doesn't change his mind often—only when circumstances change."

"And what circumstances have changed?"

"Well, you see," stumbled on Viktor in painful embarrassment, "for one thing, he has found another fellow whom he thinks will do better over there, for the beginning, at any rate; thinks me a trifle young for the post, you see."

"But you have not got younger since he came to his first resolution," objected Clare, with a somewhat ironical uplifting of her well-moulded upper-lip.

"No, of course not. But—as Max said just now—he dislikes a change of secretary—finds that, after all, he can't do without me here—has been used to me for so long—and all that."

"You mean that he prefers to go on using you as a drudge?"

The tone was distinctly one of displeasure, not only towards the selfish banker, but also towards the drudge in question. In the glance resting upon him something like reproof was written. Although she had no ground whatever for imputing to Viktor the fault of the present position, the scorn in her eyes made it patent that Clare Reeves was one of those people with whom success alone can hope to succeed.

And Viktor felt it so keenly that, under her inquisitorial gaze, his head drooped perceptibly.

Then, quite suddenly, another aspect of the case presented itself.

This beautiful creature who sat in judgment upon him—this censor in white draperies—owed to him, and to him alone, her ignorance of the truth, and therefore her present happiness. Upon one word from his lips her whole future hung.

At the thought, the exultation of self-sacrifice came over him like a mental intoxication, firing him with the courage to raise his head and look her straight in the face.

"After all, it is rather flattering to me than otherwise, is it not?" he said in a new tone of assurance.

"Oh, yes—but also rather unjust."

To Clare's tone, too, there had come a change. Maybe it had occurred to her that she was being a little too hard upon Max's brother; or maybe it was the blaze of light in Viktor's eyes which had wrought the change. Until now she had thought him rather heavy —but with that blaze in his eyes he became almost

handsome, though, of course, not comparable to her own Apollonic Max. Anyway, merely viewed as a man, he was clearly not that negligeable quantity for which she had hitherto taken him.

"It must be such a disappointment to you," she said with the severity of her tone perceptibly softened: "and of course I feel sorry for your disappointment, since you are going to be my brother."

Before the dazzling smile bent upon him the hot blood rushed to Viktor's head. He was so guiltily conscious of not feeling like a brother towards her—of not desiring her for a sister! Had not the thought of remaining in her neighbourhood been the one drop of comfort in his cup of bitterness?

Once more his eyes fell before hers.

* * * * *

It was not until after Max's departure late that evening that Viktor's affairs could be discussed at ease.

"An unfortunate occurrence, certainly," was Sir William's dignified definition of the situation. "And after I had mentioned the matter, too, to both Ridwell and Parkson.

Lady Reeves could find nothing else to say but "Dear! dear! what a pity, to be sure!" varied by commiserating remarks upon the "poor young man's disappointment," while Clare, her first annoyance passed, seemed half inclined to brave out the matter.

"After all," she declared, with head very erect, "I don't see what there is to make such a fuss about. When I got engaged to Max his brother was a private secretary, and he goes on being a private secretary now; so what is it all about? I suppose you don't

expect me to break my engagement because my future brother-in-law might have been a bank director and is not?"

"My dear girl," protested Sir William, the gravity of whose countenance was already melting into paternal approval of the very becoming poise of Clare's defiant head, "what conclusions to jump to! And, besides, what have our expectations ever had to do with your different courses of action?"

And he repeated his favourite gesture—that of a long, white finger being shaken with what can only be defined as majestic playfulness, at the fair rebel.

Clare laughed this time, though still defiantly.

"You mean that I am accustomed to take my own line? I am glad that you recognise that, at any rate. It saves a lot of argument."

"Argument? When have I ever attempted it? I can't recall any such thing even in the nursery."

"Can't you? I have a vivid recollection of a very unpleasant discussion which turned upon castor oil; but I think I convinced you that time very effectively. How many bottles was it I broke? Five or six?"

"Six, if I remember right; and—yes—the conviction was effective, so effective that ever since I have been docility itself, have I not? When you asked me—no—when you told me that you meant to marry your German teacher, did I offer the smallest resistance?"

"H'm, I fancy I can recall some attempt at an argument there too; but I am bound to say that, on the whole you are a very reasonable sort of papa, as papas go, and that I haven't got much to complain of."

She leaned forward in her chair in order smilingly

to shake Sir William's white hand with the tips of her own whiter fingers. Then for a moment father and daughter gazed at each other with that suave mutual approval which characterised their intercourse, while Lady Reeves, quite accustomed to being left out of the reckoning, smiled more broadly than either of them as she contemplated the charming picture.

"Dear Clare is right"—she murmured in the tone of one making a discovery (just as though dear Clare had ever been known to be wrong!) "It cannot really matter what Max's brother is, so long as Max himself is the man to make her happy."

It was Sir William now who threw up his head.

"Of course he is the man to make her happy. Does she not love him, and he her?"

It was always in this challenging tone that Sir William was accustomed to meet even an implied doubt concerning the success of Clare's marriage. In the privacy of his mind he had not yet quite recovered from astonishment at his own surrender, even though no one knew better than himself that it was to *force majeure* that he had surrendered. Needless to comment upon the severity of the blow which Clare's engagement had been both to his personal vanity and to his social ambitions. To Clare's mother the blow had been the same—in a certain sense even to Clare herself, in whose girlish dreams a great—possibly a titled—match had usurped the chief place. What brow better fitted than hers to wear a coronet? What figure more obviously created for carrying off a Court train? The discovery of the state of her affections had in the first moment appeared to herself as a catastrophe. She, the cool-headed, the

carefully calculating "professional beauty," victim of a quite ordinary—a girl's normal passion? It was scarcely to be credited, and certainly not to be submitted to without a struggle. But this latter was short, for, having satisfied herself that it was useless, she had surrendered handsomely to fate. There was a good deal that was hard, a good deal that was ruthless, but nothing that was cowardly about Clare Reeves.

And here her father's views met her own. Exactly because Clare was marrying her German teacher, Sir William was determined to carry off the matter with a high hand. Having bowed to the inevitable, all his efforts now became directed to the turning of the defeat into a triumph; which could best be done by emphasising the romantic side of the affair and taking up the standpoint that his daughter's position as well as fortune left her free to follow the voice of her heart; that her choice alone amply sufficed to raise the favoured man to the desired level, much as a Queen raises the subject towards whom she deigns to stoop.

In this sense the theme was always discussed, even within the bosom of the family, and outward appearances thus successfully kept up. Which does not mean, however, that, below the surface, certain regrets had ceased to gnaw; nor that, as has been seen, indifference to the social position of future "connexions" had supervened.

Despite the radiancy of the smile exchanged between father and daughter, it was not to be denied that Viktor—and consequently by reflection Max—had suffered a certain loss of estimation by the news lately discussed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "SOMETHING BEHIND."

THE torture of impatience undergone by Mr. Beesly while awaiting the reply from Vienna was a thing to be estimated by himself alone. But, once in possession of that reply, he considered that it had been worth undergoing. For Walter had come up to expectations. "Always ready to lend you a helping hand," he had written in the exuberance of his relief at finding that Cornelius was actually not asking for a loan (for which Cornelius himself read: "Always ready to do anything which keeps you off my books"). The affair of the overcoat was proved up to the hilt. Walter had, with his own eyes, read the entry in the police books, and furnished a perfect arsenal of details.

"And now hurry up, and get into his berth!" urged the writer in conclusion.

"Easier said than done," reflected Beesly, who had found the letter waiting for him on his return from the Bank, and had grown almost faint with delight while reading it; for the nature and precision of the details far surpassed his most sanguine expectations. The enemy was given into his hand and no mistake. But how—how make the most of his advantage? How strike the blow in a manner that would save himself

from its repercussion? He could certainly undo Viktor Vogler; but the danger of undoing himself in the process was not small. For to appear in the odious *rôle* of a tell-tale—to appear so in Nella's eyes—would be to defeat his own end. The berth into which he meant to get, upon which all his ambitions were centred, was not exactly the one to which Walter referred when he wrote that sentence.

In the interval he had been thinking hard, and had arrived at forming a pretty correct guess at the actual situation, as being played behind the scenes. For one thing, it was clear by this time that Mr. Gairdner intended to hush up the matter—also to keep on Viktor as private secretary. That was just like his lenient good-nature, for which Mr. Beesly could not forbear feeling a slightly contemptuous pity. But would he push this leniency to the point of giving his daughter in marriage to a convicted thief? Mr. Beesly could not believe that he would: and in that thought found comfort—but only a measure of it. For there was the daughter herself to be reckoned with; and all that Mr. Beesly knew of her led him to the conclusion that she would have her own way quite as successfully as had Clare Reeves. So long as Viktor's guilt remained hidden from her eyes no mere paternal veto would prove a real obstacle. Therefore it must not remain hidden. To make it public was, for Cornelius's interests, an absolute necessity. Not to appear in the matter was another equally urgent necessity. How reconcile these two requirements? Come what may, he must play no ignoble part in Nella's eyes. A thousand times he repeated this to himself. That would mean

more even than the loss of a self-esteem which he had never actually enjoyed; it would mean the far more tragic loss of the last hope of ever acquiring it. With that intuition which belongs to an intense sentiment, he knew that though Nella might possibly forgive a crime she would never forgive a meanness.

And yet the meanness had to be committed—behind the thickest mask procurable. And the mask itself would be another meanness; since after a further bout of reflection, nothing better presented itself than the old, worn-out but no less poisoned dart of an anonymous letter. This was the course he finally decided upon—not without inner qualms.

But to whom should it be addressed? Not to Mr. Gairdner, who, as likely as not, would ignore it. To Viktor himself—giving him the alternative of disclosure or of disappearance from the scene? Too dangerous by far, as likely to direct suspicion upon himself, his recognised rival. Better select a more neutral recipient. Having passed all possible candidates in review, Beesly decided for Calcott, one of the youngest members, and in a certain sense the butterfly of the Bank—inquisitive as a child, talkative as a woman, constitutionally incapable of keeping any sort of information to himself. No better channel for reaching publicity could possibly be imagined than Calcott. And publicity once achieved, not all Mr. Gairdner's personal wishes could save Viktor from having to disappear from the scene, the loss of Nella's favour following as a matter of course. Here, too, Beesly had quite correctly guessed that absolute secrecy must necessarily have been the first condition made by Mr. Gairdner.

The composition of the letter was in itself so much of a work of art that in the satisfaction of achievement the lingering qualms were stifled. It purported to come from a client of the Bank; who, in his concern for its good name, felt compelled to call attention to the black sheep which had found shelter within its immaculate fold, but who, from motives of personal prudence (since everyone knows how vindictive black sheep can be) preferred to sign himself simply "Anglo-Austrian," which served at once to explain the English stamp and his acquaintance with the Viennese episode. "If I address myself to one of the junior members," wrote—or rather typed the "Anglo-Austrian"—since the blessing of typewriters has done away with the necessity of disguised handwritings—"rather than to the head of the Bank, it is because I happen to be aware that the chief has already been warned, but, for reasons of his own, prefers to keep that warning to himself. Apparently he thinks he has done enough by cancelling the offer of directorship lately made; the explanation for which change you surely must be a set of suckling-babes to have swallowed in the form it was given."

"That will do!" decided Beesly, having read over the production. Upon which he put on his hat and took 'a 'bus drive to the opposite end of London, for the sole purpose of securing a post-mark which, if it furnished any clue, could only furnish a wrong one.

He had not to wait longer than until next morning in order to admire the effects of his own handiwork. By midday there scarcely remained a clerk in the Bank who had not at least heard of the contents of the

anonymous letter, and few who had not read it. Upon both readers and hearers it acted as does the solution of a conundrum. For naturally it was not the Reeves family alone who had been breaking their heads over Mr. Gairdner's change of dispositions. Seeing that the Hamburg appointment would have entailed that of a new private secretary, an extensive ventilation of the subject had been unavoidable. On the whole it had been agreed that Beesly's chance was the best, despite some minor ambitions blooming in the background. All the more astonishing was it that the sallow-faced clerk should seem so little annoyed at the post remaining filled, should take so small a part in the discussion of the hour. This not without good reasons: Beesly being tongue-tied by that distrust of his own temper which has already been noted. To what was being said he had listened attentively, but contributed studiously little in the way of remarks; and, by preference, such things which, while skilfully disguising his position, were best calculated to sow doubts in the minds of his hearers.

"Something behind it?" he observed on one of these occasions. "Why must there necessarily be something behind it? Is not Mr. Gairdner's wish to retain his right-hand man a perfectly plausible explanation?"

By an immense effort he even succeeded in keeping the scorn out of his voice as he pronounced the obnoxious word.

"Deuced unpleasant it must be to have one's right hand amputated. What wonder that the Governor should shirk the operation?"

Despite himself his lips here twitched into a wry smile.

"After he'd made up his mind to it? Not likely. I stick to there being something behind it, despite your denial, Beesly!"

"I am not in a position either to deny or to affirm anything, my dear Calcott, being exactly as ignorant as yourself!"

Beyond such non-committal remarks as these Beesly was firmly resolved not to go; nor did go even to-day, when his turn for reading the fateful letter came in its good time.

"There! Did I not tell you there was something behind it?" asked Calcott, with a note of triumph in his voice, as he plumped down the type-written sheet before him.

"Read that!"

Beesly read, with bent head, taking care not to raise it until he felt sure of the composition of his features.

"This can't be true, surely!" he said with his lips, while at the same time his eyes were crying out into the world that he feared it was only too true. "After all, it's only an anonymous letter."

"Yes, of course, it's pretty beastly doing it in that way; but if it isn't true why doesn't the chief have the matter cleared up? His silence is the fishiest part of all. We all know that he dotes on Vogler."

"You are right there, of course," conceded Beesly reflectively. "Once a discreditable story is set afloat, the only way of getting out of it is by tracing it to its origin and proving it to be a myth—supposing it to be one, that is to say."

"Which is evidently what the Governor does not

mean to do—that's square. And it's square too, that he means to hold up Vogler. Do you think he will be able to do it?"

"I really have no opinion on the subject," said Beesly, looking a picture of neutrality and discretion. "You see, I am not in Mr. Gairdner's confidence."

By the afternoon of that same day Viktor began to be aware of a change in the atmosphere. Heads were more frequently and more markedly raised at his entrance, and eyes scrutinised him with a new attention; such, at least, was his fancy, while telling himself that it could only be fancy, since Mr. Gairdner had certainly not broken his pledge of secrecy. Of the successful injection of hidden poison into the body of his colleagues and of its sure and steady work he could have no suspicion.

Nevertheless an undefined uneasiness pursued him all that day—to change upon the following into something like certitude.

It came quite abruptly—in Beesly's office, whither he had come with a bill in his hand, and somewhat ruffled by what seemed an unbusinesslike proceeding—possibly also, unconsciously, by the recent strain upon his nerves.

"Look here, Beesly," he said, speaking rather more sharply than was his wont: "this won't do; you must go through this again; these figures don't square. Either you have made a fault in addition, or else Selby and Co. have—since, of course, we don't suppose that they are trying to get the better of us."

"There's certainly no mistake in my addition," snapped

Beesly, bristling on the instant. "Such a thing never happens to me."

"Then it must have happened to Selby and Co. We can vouch for their honesty, of course, but not necessarily for their arithmetic."

"Ah, yes—Mr. Gairdner is an expert in honesty, is he not?" sneered Beesly, giving one quick upward glance into Viktor's face.

"An expert?"

"Yes. Knows an honest man when he sees him; boasts of it, in fact. Funny, wouldn't it be, if he made a mistake for once—just for once, you know."

"Are you speaking of Selby and Co.?" asked Viktor with a sudden cold feeling about his heart.

"No, I'm not speaking of Selby and Co.," said Beesly, laying upon each syllable all the emphasis of a malice which has abruptly broken bounds, while out of his small, dark eyes there shot two darts of hatred.

Without another word Viktor turned and left the room. The glance, even more than the words, had told him that he was betrayed. By whom or by what means he could not even attempt to guess. All he knew was that the secret of the past no longer lay between himself and Mr. Gairdner alone.

Left alone in his office, Mr. Beesly felt half inclined to bite out his tongue. That treacherous temper of his —the one thing he could not always keep in hand— had played him another trick. He had meant to be so prudent, so impersonal, to remain so modestly in the background; but the last few minutes had sadly impaired that would-be neutral attitude.

CHAPTER X.

NELLA'S ENLIGHTENMENT.

AMONG Miss Jerrum's peculiarities was a shame-faced, but not the less genuine passion for whist—the original article, free from any taint of Bridge-like innovation. The reason for the shame-facedness lay in an innate reluctance to press her own wishes upon her surroundings, and a lurking suspicion that the beloved "children" would rather be doing something more lively. Another reason might have been the difficulty she felt in distinguishing the kings from the knaves, as well as the impossibility of ever counting a suit. But, seeing that she remained mercifully unconscious of them, these small disabilities failed to disturb her mind. A little gentle pressure was amply sufficient to overcome Pussy's scruples, thus supplying her with the coveted rubber, and the girls with a form of joke which daily repetition had not yet staled.

The process was invariably the same; yet with an ever recurring air of novelty skilfully suggested.

"Supposing we have a little whist—I move for a rubber!"

Upon which Miss Jerrum, in the tone of a person struck by an entirely new idea, would daily repeat:

"A rubber?"

"Yes, why not? There's just time before bed."

"But Daisy is reading; and I fancy that you would rather—"

"I'm thirsting for cards, my dear Pussy; and Daisy is only spoiling her eyes," briskly decided Nella. "I think it's your duty to prevent her. Come along, girls!"

A few minutes later they were grouped around the card-table, minus Aggie, who was in bed by this time, and Mr. Gairdner, who preferred to read his newspaper, unless a shortage of players compelled him to take a hand in what was privately known as "Pussy Whist," and whose relation to the real game limited itself to the name. The chief feature of it was bare-faced cheating —of course always in favour of Pussy, who would not sleep happy unless triumphant, and whose night's rest therefore demanded considerable dexterity in the matter of passing cards under the table, as well as an accepted code of telegraphic signs. The effrontery with which the condition of the game was discussed in perfectly audible whispers was apt to startle anyone not intimately acquainted with Miss Jerrum, and therefore not able to measure her exact degree of deafness, as well as to appreciate her absorption in the cards which she had never yet learnt to range without dropping about one third in the process. In equally audible tones Pussy would consult with the adviser at her elbow, who likewise was a *sine quâ non;* five decades of educational grind having considerably dulled faculties which, even in their hey-day, had never belonged to the first intellectual order. About the happy puzzled face bent over the cards, and in the running fire of her observa-

tions, there was something almost as pathetic as it was comical.

"My turn? Dear me—to be sure! Never mind me, childie! You know what a stupid old woman I am! Now, let me see—what is trumps?—Would you play the ace or the king, if you were me, Amy?"

Then when the king had taken the trick, and laughing all over her circular face in agreeable surprise:

"That is splendid! I thought the king would do. Didn't you, Amy?"

"I thought so too!" grinned Amy, pecking a kiss at the cheek beside her, and thereby deranging the enormous lace cap which entirely covered Pussy's head, leaving only a narrow streak of grey hair visible on each side of the face, like a strip of grey satin ribbon. Her eyes were the only sort of eyes which one could imagine Pussy having—blue eyes full of that dewy, half sleepy look which children's eyes so often have, when they are *real* children—though few of her many pupils could ever have been such perfect children as was this deliciously innocent old lady, with her seventieth birthday in sight.

The day upon which Viktor had kissed his chief's hand and then hastened out of the office for fear of disgracing himself, was one of those upon which Mr. Gairdner, owing to some accidental absence of Amy's, had been pressed into service at the card-table. But for this circumstance, and had he remained, according to custom, behind his evening paper, Nella would very likely not have troubled further about the taciturnity which he had exhibited at dinner. In itself—considering the tricks which Mexican Rails and Chinese Bonds were apt to be up to—this taciturnity was not nearly

so remarkable as that he should fail to do his duty at the whist-table. Usually, with cheerful resignation to his fate, he was wont to enter heartily into the spirit of the joke, and had become as good as any at passing cards under the table or using the telegraphic code, which was of a simple and elementary nature; laying one's hand on one's left side, for instance, signifying a demand for hearts, while bringing one's right hand down club-wise upon the table was an equally distinct request for the corresponding colour. Yet Mr. Gairdner, though up to all of the dodges, used none of them to-day, but looked as serious over his cards as though he were playing genuine whist—as serious, but not by any means as attentive. It was after Nella had caught him in two revokes that she began to be alarmed. Had the "Mexican Rails" been behaving as badly as all that? The idea was, at this moment, particularly unwelcome, seeing that she had just been seriously thinking of asking him to raise Daisy's and Lucy's dress allowance. Now that they were getting so big they really needed a few more nice things. The extension of the banking business, as illustrated by the new branch-houses, had inspired hopes in this direction; but what meant this new preoccupation? Had anything gone seriously wrong? In order to ascertain how deep the preoccupation went it seemed advisable to probe the banker's mind.

"Now, dad," she said reprovingly—"what else is this but rushing upon your own fate? You *know* that Lucy trumped your spade last time."

"I'm sorry—I forgot"—said Mr. Gairdner as penitently as though he had indeed committed some reprehensible act.

"If you happen to have the queen of diamonds"—remarked Lucy at this moment in a matter of fact and only slightly hushed tone—"you might pass it over here. It will never do for you to take this trick."

Instead of smuggling over the desired card, with a twinkle in his eye, as was his wont, Mr. Gairdner fell into a brown study over his hand, and had to be kicked twice under the table before he came up to expectations.

"Better let us win this one"—remarked Nella in the same audible murmur. "We'll leave you the next."

This too belonged to the principles of "Pussy Whist," which, by this time, had been worked up into a fine art. An occasional lost rubber could only be a fillip to the joy of gaining; while an unbroken series of victories might have ended by arousing even Miss Jerrum's suspicions.

"Now, then, Pussy!"

"My turn? You don't say so! It's spades that are trumps, ain't it?"

"I thought it was hearts"—said Mr. Gairdner.

Nella laid down her cards in dramatic desperation.

"Really, dad—you should leave your business thoughts at the bank! Pussy is quite right—it is spades that are trumps. I suppose your head is so full of shares and consols that you have no room in it for card suits. Or is it the new houses that are so absorbing you to-day?"

"I know what it is" put in Daisy, who was acting as Miss Jerrum's adviser and therefore in a position to grin surreptitiously over her shoulder in Nella's direction. "Dad is breaking his head as to where to find a new

private secretary, going through the pangs of parting, and all that sort of thing in advance—and not so good at disguising his feelings as some people may be."

"Rubbish!" said Nella, flushing hotly, while answering her inconveniently observant sister's grin by a judicial frown. "Papa has no need to break his head there. He will find plenty of private secretaries."

"I am not looking for one"—said Mr. Gairdner reluctantly.

"Because there is no hurry, or because you have got one already?"

"Because Vogler is staying on; I'm not sending him to Hamburg."

There was a short silence at the whist-table, broken only by Miss Jerrum's running comments upon what card she had better play next.

Then Daisy burst out with the question which Nella was wanting to ask, and with difficulty restraining.

"Good gracious! why not?"

"Business reasons," said Mr. Gairdner shortly. "Whose turn is it?"

"Do business reasons crop up as suddenly as all that? I thought everything that business men did, was always so carefully considered, so well weighed—and all the rest."

"There are issues involved which you can't be expected to understand," said Mr. Gairdner rather testily.

"Is he disappointed?" asked Nella quickly, though rather low.

"I haven't asked him. Whose turn is it? I thought we were playing whist."

Of the three "grown-ups" who sat at that card-table

Pussy was the only one who went to bed happy that night, revelling in a "grand slam." Mr. Gairdner, even in his dreams, could not shake off his depression; while Nella had so much to do trying to disentangle contradictory sensations that sleep did not come until late. Viktor's probable disappointment had been her first thought, and remained the uppermost one; yet relief at the averted separation was serving to complicate her feelings in the same measure as the threat of this same separation had previously done.

Just at first, concern for Viktor kept curiosity at bay. Yet, upon reflection, it grew after a few days. Already she wanted very much to know what exactly had happened,—and, in view of her father's strange reticence, it was to Viktor himself that she must look for enlightenment. This, too, would enable her to judge more correctly of the situation; for, after all, what she wanted principally to know was exactly how much he was feeling disappointed.

Saturday, therefore, was waited for with more than normal impatience,—but proved a blank when it came, —producing only a few unimportant and irresponsible youngsters, who would certainly not be "in the know."

"He is visiting his future sister, I suppose"—said Nella to herself, with a little pang at her heart.

Even Mr. Beesly—though she did not like him—might have been some use as an informant. But Mr. Beesly, after a severe struggle with inclination, had decided that until the answer came from Vienna—that is, until he held his rival at his mercy—he dare not trust himself into Nella's presence.

By the following Saturday the necessary conditions

were fulfilled,—Walter's answer received, and the anonymous letter doing its work. Had it begun to do it upon Nella yet? Had any whisper of the facts reached her ear? These were now the burning questions, and this the consideration which accompanied Beesly to the Wimbledon tennis-ground. It was rather annoying that Calcott was not of the party,—since he would have greatly preferred to leave the initiative to him; but the bank butterfly had lately taken to flutter about some flower which grew on some other spot than Wimbledon, and could therefore no longer be counted on for the Saturday sets. Failing him, Beesly felt almost equal now to dropping the first drop of suspicion into Nella's mind—supposing that this still remained to be done; but how and to what degree the execution should take place must remain dependent upon circumstances.

The first glance showed him that Nella had put on a new frock, a wonderful combination of *tussore* and thread lace, which she and Madame Ambrosine had hatched out between them, far too smart for playing tennis in, and donned—as he shrewdly surmised—in the hope of being seen by the right eyes.

So absorbed was Nella in looking in one direction that she did not hear Beesly's step upon the grass.

"No use watching the gate,"—said his voice close at hand, with in it a distinctly ironical inflection. "There is nobody more coming."

Nella turned with a start.

"Oh, Mr. Beesly,—I didn't see you. Aren't you playing in this set?"

"No. Gaster has cut me out with Miss Daisy; and Miss Lucy objects to my serves;—which reduces me,

for the moment, to the *rôle* of fifth wheel to the cart."

"And I'm the sixth. Somehow I don't feel much like tennis to-day. This skirt is a trifle long. Shall we sit down here?"—a conveniently shady seat happening to be handy.

Although Nella did not like Mr. Beesly, she, of course, knew perfectly well that he liked her, and had no rooted objection to occasionally flinging him a crumb of favour. To refrain from exercising her powers upon so obvious a slave would really have been a little beyond human nature. At any rate it was beyond Nella's nature, whose powers were of the sort that work automatically, seemingly without any commands from the brain. To the naked eye Nella was a creature all frills and furbelows and frivolously inviting smiles. What might be below the furbelows nobody could as yet say, —not even Nella herself.

Just now she had come to the conclusion that, in default of others, she would have, after all, to use Mr. Beesly as an informant; since another week of this suspense was in no way to be endured.

But the approach of the subject remained a delicate matter. As she sat upon the rustic bench, reflectively decapitating daisies with her racket, she was trying to fight down her reluctance to a direct question. There were, after all, so many objections to this course. Simultaneously Beesly was attempting to analyse her expression, in order to conclude satisfactorily whether its preoccupation was due only to Viktor's absence, or might be attributable to some whisper of his disgrace.

"Pity Vogler has failed us again," he observed ten-

tatively, his eyes ostensibly fixed on the tennis-ground. "Only man whom it amuses me to beat—when he is in good form, that is to say, which he wasn't last time, by the way. These youngsters are really not foemen worthy of my steel."

"He must have been prevented——" hazarded Nella.

"I should not be astonished if he went on being prevented," said Mr. Beesly, after a tiny pause.

"Dear me—why?—since he is not going to Hamburg after all."

("No"—commented Beesly within himself—"She has heard nothing yet. What a nuisance Calcott not being here! Will I have to do it myself? I'd much rather not; and yet she's *got* to be enlightened.")

"I suppose you know that Mr. Vogler is not going to Hamburg?" questioned Nella a little impatiently, annoyed by his silence.

"Yes—I know that, of course; we all do."

"He's disappointed, I suppose?" she asked as carelessly as possible, while continuing her execution among the daisies.

Beesly looked at her sidewise, unduped by the seeming indifference, and with the bitter flood of jealousy rising steadily within him. It was upon this flood that his next words rose:

"I fancy he is not the only person who is feeling disappointed."

"And the other person?"

"Is Mr. Gairdner himself."

"Dad? Why should he be disappointed, since it is his own decision?"

"A decision may be dictated by necessity, may it not?—and necessities are sometimes cruel."

It was almost more than he had meant to say yet he felt powerless not to say it.

Nella sat up straight, with a sort of jerk, in order to stare at Mr. Beesly. By the look of the questioning, almost frightened eyes fixed upon him, he could see that alarm was already at work; and the very sight of it and the thought of that which was causing it spurred in him the savage desire to increase the anguish he witnessed.

"What on earth do you mean?"

His mien abruptly showed surprise, tempered by discretion.

"Oh—I beg your pardon! I fancied that you might possibly have heard something."

"About what?"

"It is not my place to inform you—your father not having found it necessary to do so. I cannot suppose that he is in ignorance."

"Of what? What are you talking about?" asked Nella wildly, and taking a convulsive hold of the handle of her racket, "I don't understand a word of it all!"

"Perhaps it will be better if you do not get to understand. Knowledge is sometimes painful."

"But I want to know—you *must* tell me!" cried Nella, and in her eagerness laid a heated hand upon his sleeve; "—if there is anything to tell, that is to say. You can't stop now. What cruel necessity are you speaking of?"

"Would you not call the upholding of the fair name of the Bank a necessity, even though it costs the sacri-

fice of the prospects of a person who—to whom you have given all your confidence?"

Nella paused for a moment, as though more completely to take in the sense of the words. From the tennis-ground there came the monotonous calls of "Fifteen—thirty!"—"Thirty—all!"—and from the big rose-plot beyond, the equally monotonous "click-click" of Mr. Gairdner's pruning-shears.

"But what has the fair name of the Bank got to do with Mr. Vogler? *He* has certainly not done anything to compromise it?"

"I am not saying that he has—am I his judge? But surely it is bad enough that things should be said of him that ought never to be said of any member of the Bank."

"Nothing bad can ever be said about Vik—about Mr. Vogler"—declared Nella with conviction.

That slip of the tongue, and the way in which she simultaneously snatched her hand from his sleeve were too much for Mr. Beesly.

"Can't it?" he flung out, barely trying to veil the sneer in his tone. "Then what do you call four weeks' imprisonment? Is that not bad enough for your taste?"

With every word he spoke he could feel his self-control slipping from him, almost palpably, but the bitter flood in his heart had drowned prudence for the moment.

Nella was staring at him blankly, having first turned rather white, and then very red.

"Four weeks' imprisonment?" she repeated, in a tone that was as dazed as his eyes. "You say that——"

"That, according to information received—for which of course I do not pretend to vouch—Viktor Vogler is down in the Viennese police-books for four weeks' imprisonment suffered in the year of grace 189—"

"Suffered for what, do they pretend?"

"Oh, for nothing very terrible," said Beesly, who was almost enjoying himself now. "Only for the theft of an overcoat."

The way in which the word was pronounced made of the pettiness of the offence a fresh accusation.

"I don't believe it!" said Nella, vehemently, with eyes on fire. "And, besides, how do you know anything about it?" she asked, turning fiercely upon him. "How has this—this disgusting lie come to be spread?"

"The information came through a letter received by Calcott."

"From whom?"

"The writer signed himself 'Anglo-Austrian.'"

Nella burst into an overstrained laugh.

"An anonymous letter?—I thought so! And you actually expected Mr. Vogler to trouble himself about an anonymous accusation?"

"Mr. Gairdner seems, at any rate, to have troubled himself about it—to some extent, since he thought it necessary to cancel the Hamburg appointment."

"Did papa see the anonymous letter?"

"No. He had evidently got private information—presumably not anonymous."

"A plot!" said Nella, between her teeth with another and fiercer onslaught upon the daisies.

"After all, it isn't anything so very bad," sneered Beesly; "an overcoat isn't a big thing; and no doubt he

was badly in want of one. Nobody wants to make him out a dangerous criminal, you know."

"I don't believe a word of it!"

"I thought you wouldn't. And yet police-books aren't fairy-tales."

"Exactly. Therefore they have only got to be searched, in order to prove the falseness of the charge."

"Then why does not Vogler insist on having them searched?"

"He will—as soon as he knows; I'm sure he doesn't know. Mr. Vogler is the soul of honour. You have only got to look at him to know that."

"Thank you—I have no desire to look at him," snapped Beesly, finally losing both his footing and his head under the stress of the bitter flood; and there is no need either for 'the soul of honour' to trouble himself further about the Viennese police-books. I have had them searched already—my duty towards the Bank urged me to obtain certitude in the matter. And I have obtained it—just as I do not doubt that Mr. Gairdner too has obtained it—even though for reasons of his own he may prefer to hush up things."

"Papa knows nothing! I won't believe it!"

"Supposing you ask him?" suggested Beesly, all his nerves vibrating in a very ecstasy of spite.

"So I shall!"

Nella sprang to her feet.

"This very minute! It's a calumny; and it's got to be stamped out—by papa. Where is he? Ah—among his roses. Yes—I'll ask him!"

Without another look at Beesly, she set off running towards the big rose-plot at the other end of the garden.

With a smile of mingled rage and triumph upon his lips, Beesly stood and watched her.

"Yes—ask him! ask him!" he was muttering in his throat.

Once more his traitorous temper had carried him beyond his original intention. But at that moment he did not really care what might happen to himself—thinking of that which must surely now happen to Viktor Vogler.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT NEXT?

MR. GAIRDNER'S rose-bed was the one spot upon which the pseudo agricultural air which hung about his person ever came to its rights. Here it was that on summer evenings, armed with the pruning-shears, which became his plump fingers so much better than did a quill pen, and dressed in one of his favourite linen coats, he moved in his proper element.

Just now he was occupied with the congenial task of snipping off the overblown roses and counting the opening buds—that is, speeding the elder generation and hailing the new one—as is customary not only upon rose-plots.

It was a work he usually beamed over. But to-day, as he caused heads to fall, his own seemed rather inclined to hang. Recent events had been depressing—for various reasons. Lately the memory of his chubby Charlie, whose cheeks had remained rounded even in death, had been losing a good deal of its bitterness, because of a certain substitution foreseen—while now——

Upon these reflections enter Nella in a whirlwind of silk petticoats, and panting—not only from the pace at which she had traversed the lawn.

"It isn't true, is it, papa?" she was saying almost before she had reached him. "Tell me that it isn't true!"

"Mind the shears, child! What am I to tell you isn't true?"

"That Mr. Vogler has ever done anything wrong, and been locked up for it. Of course I know it's nonsense."

Mr. Gairdner bent abruptly over a low-hanging rose-branch. A moment passed before he asked in carefully measured tones: "Who has been talking about Vogler?"

"That idiot Beesly. He tells an absurd story about an overcoat, and about four weeks' imprisonment. But, of course, I know——"

"And who told Beesly the story?"

"Oh, somebody at the Bank who got an anonymous letter, and then somebody else to whom Mr. Beesly applied for information. There seems to be a second Viktor Vogler afloat, which is unfortunate, of course, for Mr. Vogler, and all the more necessary to give the lie to the story—isn't it, papa?"

While still steadily decapitating roses, Mr. Gairdner was carefully weighing his next words. Not hard, indeed, to identify the source from which sprang this thirst for justice. Until quite recently he had approved of the source, but circumstances had altered. However much of a father he might be, he was also a business man, and the thought of a son-in-law whose name was down in the police-books revolted this personage within

him. He would have given a good deal to prevent the story having leaked out, yet now that it had leaked out, and thereby released him of the pledge of secrecy, what better opportunity could there be for crushing in Nella an attachment which could now lead to nothing?

Meanwhile Nella was watching him in a fever.

"Why don't you speak, papa? Why don't you tell me it isn't true?"

Straightening himself to look into her eyes, he saw them full of anguish, and hardened his heart.

"The fact of the matter is that it *is* true," he said, with artificial harshness, telling himself that the cleaner the cut the quicker the healing process—was it not just the same with the rose-bushes? "It's an old story by now," he went on, turning his attention back to the bushes; "and perhaps unfortunate that it should have come to light; but now that it has, it becomes, of course, impossible to ignore it."

Without looking at Nella he knew that the bright colour had retreated suddenly from her cheeks.

"You mean that——"

He broke in impatiently, intent only on getting the job done thoroughly, once for all.

"Oh, just what you have probably heard already—that Vogler, when a lad, purloined an overcoat, and was punished by four weeks imprisonment. There's no possible doubt about the matter," he added quickly, as though to crush in advance any imaginable retort. "He has confessed it himself to me."

For another moment Nella stood rigid, and so white that her brown eyes appeared black by contrast to her skin.

Apprehensively Mr. Gairdner watched her. To his masculine perception the alternative seemed to lie between a dead faint, and a burst of tears—and, after all, they were in full view of the tennis ground. This was one of the moments in which the disadvantage of being a father, instead of a mother, was apt to strike him acutely.

"There's no help for it, you see," he added, more uncertainly; "the facts are, unfortunately, beyond dispute."

Then it was that Nella put him entirely out of his calculations, by neither fainting nor bursting into tears, but, on the contrary, by abruptly squaring her shoulders and throwing up her head, in order to say emphatically and distinctly:

"Well, then—I simply *don't care!*"

"Eh?"

"Facts, are they?" she burst out, with her eyes beginning to blaze and the blood to flow into her face; "and beyond dispute? So much the worse for the facts! I care just that much for them!" and shooting out a small, ungloved hand, she deliberately snapped her fingers in the face of her astonished parent. "What do I mind about a stupid overcoat? Either Mr. Vogler didn't take it, or if he did take it then there were reasons for it. That can't change anything about him, really—can't make him into a different person from what he is. That's the only fact that *I* care about."

With the pruning shears hanging limply in his hand, Mr. Gairdner stood speechless. This certainly was not the end towards which he had been working. With denials he could have grappled, but against this feminine

logic he had no arms. The late Mrs. Gairdner might presumably, have known how to deal with the case. One more regretful but unavailing thought was consecrated to her memory by the nonplussed father of five growing-up girls. Four more to come after Nella! At this moment the thought was nothing short of appalling.

"No doubt there are allowances to be made," he lamely began. "If I had not taken into consideration his youth and the straits he has been in I would not have kept him a day longer in the Bank."

The sides of Nella's tip-tilted nose swelled in a fashion resembling a snort.

"Really it's very kind of you to make allowances for a man whom you know that you trust as you do yourself—in spite of all the overcoats in the world. What's an overcoat, after all? And probably it wasn't for himself at all that he wanted it, but for that brother of his whom he's always so concerned about. It's dreadful to think of all he must have gone through to get to that!"

At this mark of female intuition Mr. Gairdner felt so scared, that he quickly turned back to the rose-bushes—for fear lest Nella should read upon his face how neatly she had hit the nail upon the head, and spell out there the secret sympathy with which his real self followed her words. He could not himself have so well succeeded in turning an act of larceny into one of heroism—but he was capable of applauding the feat, though not outwardly.

"Society has its laws," he remarked, taking recourse once more to the artificial harshness, "and those who offend against them have got to pay the penalty."

And he snipped off another rose-head.

* * * * *

Very soon after the opening of the Bank on Monday morning the bell rang in Viktor's office.

There was no particular presentiment upon him as he obeyed the summons—but the presentiment came with the first glimpse of Mr. Gairdner. This time he had not given to his chair any turn towards the door, but sat, on the contrary, bent rather lower than usual over his writing-table—yet the very curve of his back and the slowness with which he responded to the greeting given, filled Viktor with a vague apprehension. Twice within the last fortnight had that writing-table chair appeared to him in the light of a seat of judgment —and just now the fanciful thought crossed him that the judge who sat therein had donned his black cap.

"You sent for me?" he asked at last, as Mr. Gairdner continued to seem unaware of his presence.

Then, as though with an effort, the banker raised his head, so that Viktor could see how haggard were his eyes.

Twice he cleared his throat before beginning.

"Yes—I have sent for you—in order to ask you a question. You remember, do you not, what I said to you about the necessity of preventing a—certain incident from transpiring, and of this being conditional to your continuing in the Bank?"

"I remember," said Viktor, while a shiver ran down his spine.

"Well, to my great annoyance—as well as surprise, I find that the matter has transpired, through no fault of mine, for I can honestly say that I have kept

the promise given you. You believe that, do you not?"

"Yes, I believe it."

"Then you must also believe that the resolve I have regretfully come to is almost as painful to myself as it must be to you."

"You mean that I am to go?" asked Viktor, with something like the calmness of despair settling down upon him.

"I fear there is no alternative. For some days I have seen this coming. Something in the way your name was pronounced by your colleagues seemed to me suspicious, though I would not admit it even to myself. But on Saturday I—heard something which leaves no doubt. The unfortunate—episode is known here—not only in England, but in this very house—and you know what my principles are, touching the good name of the Bank." Mr. Gairdner looked at Viktor almost a little deprecatingly as he paused.

"Very well, I will go," said Viktor in the same deadly calm voice.

He was not even aware of any overwhelming surprise. Now that Mr. Gairdner mentioned it, it seemed to him that he also had seen this coming.

"I will go—at once."

"Of course you understand that this in no way alters my personal opinion of you," urged Mr. Gairdner in a—for a judge—curiously shame-faced fashion, and apparently not finding it quite easy to meet Viktor's eyes. "I am more sorry than I can say to lose you, but——"

"Do you mind giving me your hand, Mr. Gairdner?"

interrupted Viktor, feeling that this was about all he could bear.

In reply his patron stretched forth both his hands, to grasp those of his private secretary.

"With all my heart! And, Vogler—as for the pecuniary question, your pay for three months will be paid to you to-day—those are the conditions of our statutes—and if you would allow me to make it six—as a private matter—it would considerably ease my mind; for it may be some time before you find other employment—considering the difficulty about a reference."

Over the last words he both stuttered and blushed, in that curious, shame-faced manner.

Viktor's massive figure had suddenly stiffened, and so had the tone in which he said:

"No, thank you, Mr. Gairdner! I will take what is my due, but not one penny more. Please allow me to retire."

He bowed almost coldly before turning. Though Mr. Gairdner was but the instrument of fate, he could not escape coming in for some of the grudge which such instruments are apt to earn.

Within his own office Viktor slowly looked around him. So that chapter was closed.

What next?

CHAPTER XII.

THE "CONFESSIONAL."

THE morrow of the day on which Nella had had her talk with Mr. Beesly, and the eve of the one on which Viktor had said to himself "What next?"—being

sandwiched between a Saturday and a Monday, was necessarily a Sunday, that is to say, a day on which Miss Jerrum's daily scruples took on an aggravated form, and on which she was accustomed to fight a hebdominal and pitched battle with her conscience, the battle-ground being furnished by the beloved "rubber." As regularly as the week-end came round, just as regularly did Miss Jerrum—in whose veins a certain portion of Scotch blood flowed—begin by discovering that it *could* not be right to have out the cards on the Sabbath, and would end by allowing herself to be convinced that, after all, there really was nothing very sinful about "just one little rubber."

In the natural course of things it was Nella's office to fight down the inconvenient conscience; but on this particular Sunday she showed so strange and quite unusual a want of energy that the juniors found it necessary to take matters into their own hands.

The first suggestion had, indeed, come from Nella, according to precedent, but it came mechanically—almost languidly.

"How about whist, Pussy? Isn't it time to be starting?"

Upon which—also according to precedent—there followed the exclamation:

"Whist?"—on the usual high note of astonishment.

And then the hurried rider:

"But it's Sunday, childie—and—I have been thinking it over—and have come to the conclusion that—I would rather not."

"That conclusion is not quite a novelty, Pussy. But, of course, if you would really rather not——"

Daisy and Lucy both looked at Nella in incredulous astonishment. What had become of their elder sister's usual briskness and decision? This, certainly, was not according to precedent. Was she actually going to yield to Pussy's half-hearted scruples, and thus deprive them all of the one bright spot which bloomed like a rose in the wilderness of Sunday's dulness? Not if Daisy—who, in some points, was an understudy of Nella—knew. That something was wrong with Nella she had seen at a glance; and with admirable presence of mind, hesitated no longer to gather up into her own hands the reins of the situation.

"Rubbish, Nella! You know quite well that it isn't a question of 'rather not,' but only of personal mortification. She thinks its good for her soul not to play whist—and never stops to reflect how bad it is for our tempers. *I* call it downright selfish to disappoint other people just because of a poor little scruple of that sort. It's not as though we were playing for money, you know."

"That is true," admitted Miss Jerrum, visibly vacillating. "But there are the servants, you see. What *must* they think of us?"

"They can't possibly think anything worse than they think already; and they'll never believe in your sudden conversion — be sure of that. If they are narrow-minded enough to condemn you they have done so long ago. Come along, Pussy! As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, you know."

"*We're* certainly going to play," declared Lucy, bouncing to her feet. "Aren't we, Nella? And surely you don't mean merely to look on."

"Well, well—if you really think—perhaps just *one* little rubber. And, after all, it isn't as though it were anything frivolous. Whist is a very serious game, is it not?"

"Oh, deadly serious," agreed Daisy, frowning hard at Amy, the breadth of whose grin threatened disaster to the "seriousness" of the situation.

When presently they were seated at the card-table it became clear, even to Amy's juvenile observation, that although Nella's body was present, her mind was not. In the matter of telegraphic signals she showed herself to-day almost as behindhand as Mr. Gairdner had been when lately pressed into service. Was it not incredible that Nella, usually the soul of "Pussy Whist," should require to be kicked under the table quite as often as on that occasion had been her father, who to-day had been left in unmolested possession of his Sunday paper.

So marked were the symptoms that—the "one little rubber" being absolved—the suggestion of "just one more"—raised by Amy, fell rather flat to the ground. Even Daisy, having noted how frequently Nella glanced towards the clock, forebore to press the point. It was clearer to her than to the others that Nella grudged the time spent at the whist-table, because she wanted to put it to another use—and not difficult to guess, either, what that use was.

In the room inhabited by Miss Jerrum, and which lay at the top of the house, with a delectable view over many gardens and towards the real open country, the most conspicuous article was a deep, straight-backed armchair, quite capable of accommodating two people, as long as one of them was passably slender. It was

partly to its box-like shape that it owed its title of "the confessional," but chiefly to the use it was put to. From time immemorial it had been the custom of the family to take all its grief and heartaches—dating from those occasioned by broken dolls and drowned kittens—to "the confessional," and there to be patted and comforted by Pussy—have one's tears dried, if necessary, and be fed with consolatory chocolates—even if not strictly necessary.

Being a shrewd young person, Daisy had therefore no difficulty in guessing that while laying down hearts and diamonds, with splendid disregard to any sort of rule, Nella was yearning towards "the confessional," and with something to disburden which would make a far bigger call upon Pussy's powers of comforting than the most beautiful broken doll had ever caused. It was in sheer sisterly mercy, therefore, that she cut short Lucy's and Amy's clamour for another rubber.

"No—we said *one,* and we'll stick to that, for once," she decided, quite in Nella's best manner.

When brushing out her hair a quarter of an hour later, Daisy heard Nella's door go, she smiled knowingly to herself, and then began rather wistfully to wonder when her turn would come for having "heart affairs," and therefore something really worth taking to the "confessional." The adjunct of a confidant—and so safe and infallibly sympathetic a one as Pussy—must add greatly to the zest of being "in love." As yet, however, Daisy knew of the condition only by hearsay—and partly by observation of Nella, and so continued to brush out her hair, unperturbed.

"May I come in?"

The head which Nella put in through the chink of Miss Jerrum's door was still crowned with its dark, undisturbed coils of hair, but the body that followed showed itself to be clad in a pale pink dressing-gown of a peculiarly becoming shade.

"You, childie? As if *you* needed to ask whether you can come in! Why, I've been waiting for you. I knew you would be wanting to have a little talk. It's because of his not having been at the tennis yesterday, isn't it? I was thinking all the time that you must be feeling put out."

These remarks will suffice to show that Pussy was absolutely *au fait* concerning the state of Nella's affections. It was several years now since the eldest of her pupils had—in the depths of the historical armchair—whispered into her confidant's ear that she was fond of "the Austrian." And many times since then she had given vent to her irritation—sometimes by thumping the cushions of the "confessional"—at his density in failing to grasp not only this fact, but even the far more elementary one of her being a grown-up person, instead of the child whom he apparently persisted in seeing in her.

"I know quite well that he goes on bunching me up in his mind with Daisy and Lucy," she had complained on one of these occasions. "I can see it by the way he looks at me—or, rather, doesn't look. It's not at all so long ago that he offered to tell me a fairy-tale. And this in spite of my hair being stuck up as high as I can get it to hold, and of my skirts being let down to my very toes! And I lose no opportunity either of talking of the new modes of hairdressing, and

of how tiresome it is that long dresses should be coming in again. But he doesn't seem even to hear. I wonder if all men are as stupid as that? Positively I am at my wits' ends what to do. If I could get him to stumble over my train that might perhaps wake him up. But, after all, I can't play tennis in a train, can I?"

Such reflections had been the chronic burden of Nella's confidences. To-day, however, there were even graver questions to be discussed.

"It's not because he wasn't here yesterday," declared Nella, ensconced already against one of the sides of the "confessional." It's something else; something much worse. Do come here, Pussy: I can't say it out loud."

"I'm coming, childie!" said Miss Jerrum, who, muffled in a voluminous white wrapper and armed with a huge silver-backed brush (a joint present from her pupils upon her sixty-ninth birthday) was gingerly at work upon what remained to her of hair. The quantity was so small as to make both the wrapper and the brush appear disproportionately large; for the head nearly hidden by the lace cap was well-nigh bald, and the two strips which looked so like bits of grey satin ribbon resolved themselves when disturbed into two thin little strips of grey hair.

With these hanging down to her shoulders and somewhat disconsolately framing her face, she now took up her place—or, to be more precise—about three-quarters of the armchair.

"What is it, childie?" she asked, putting one plump arm round the pink-clad form at her side.

"It is that he will probably never come here again!" said Nella, and burst into the long-restrained tears.

Instead of asking "Why?" Pussy first arranged her shoulder more comfortably for the face that was trying to bury itself in it; and then, when she deemed the right moment came, produced the clean pocket-handkerchief which seemed to be an integral feature of her person, so infallibly did she have it at the disposal of all the family tears.

"There, there, childie! There! there!" was all she said as she mopped Nella's wet face; after which it became necessary to mop her own, so rapidly did sympathy work even while ignorance endured.

"You'll tell me when you feel able," she added presently, gently patting the heaving shoulder beside her.

Upon which Nella immediately felt able; and, forcing down the sobs, poured our rather jerkily, but quite intelligibly, the story of the overcoat, and of all that it entailed. It was told with a touch of defiance, calculated to meet all possible strictures, which, considering the case, even Pussy might be imagined to attempt.

"You must understand me, Pussy, I am not pretending that he didn't do it," Nella insisted, "Dad says he admits it, and, of course, Dad is speaking the truth. All I say is I don't care!"

Miss Jerrum, a little stunned by the disclosure, sat silent, but the pats upon Nella's shoulder, though they grew rather more hurried, did not grow fainter. Not that she was not shocked. Conventional to the bottom of her soul in every thing that trenched on the ground

of custom, it was impossible that the bare idea of a purloined overcoat should not, despite all extenuating circumstances, scandalise her deeply. But in Nella's eyes the man had not lost in value—that much was evident—and, therefore, he must be upheld, at any cost —even at the cost of principles hitherto cherished. The "childie" believed in him in spite of the overcoat, and was being unhappy about him; therefore Miss Jerrum must believe in him, too, since to increase that unhappiness by uttering one word of blame was simply unthinkable.

Thus, roughly speaking, ran Pussy's train of thought, while she dumbly stroked the pink shoulder, fumbling the while in her pocket for the chocolates for which she judged that the psychological moment had come. The extenuating circumstances had really very little to do with her conclusions. It was simply a question of comforting Nella. After all, if she insisted on being in love with a thief, whose business was it?

When, therefore, Nella, with a fresh access of defiance, asked:

"Do *you,* perhaps, imagine that I would care for him less because of that stupid affair?"

"Of course not—deary! It is just like you not to mind."

A convulsive hug rewarded her, and encouraged her to ask:

"But what is going to happen now?"

"I don't know; but I imagine that the first thing to happen will be that dad will feel himself bound to discharge Mr. Vogler. You know how particular he is about the reputation of the Bank. But if he does that——"

"If he does that—then what, childie?"

"That's what I don't know yet. But somehow or other I shall let him know that whatever other people may think, I don't condemn him and do not think one bit worse of him than before. Perhaps that may comfort him a tiny bit, even though I know that I don't count for much, since he hasn't found out yet that I am grown-up. Ah, if it had been somebody else—that beautiful future sister-in-law, for instance—that *would* be a real comfort! But I!"

"She can't be as beautiful as you are!" maintained Pussy stoutly, while tossing back the inconvenient grey wisps, with an almost war-like gesture.

Nella burst into a rather shrill laugh.

"I, beautiful? Oh, Pussy, if you could see her!"

"Have *you* seen her, childie?"

"Did you imagine I could rest quiet without? On the day when he left us in the lurch about the tennis, in order to dine with the Reeves, I made up my mind that I would see her. And of course, I did so."

"But when? However did you manage?"

"As if one couldn't manage anything when one really wants!" said Nella, who was now munching the consolatory chocolate. "Aren't there such things as post-office directories? And is it very difficult to guess at what hour approximately a professional beauty will start for her drive in the Park? I managed—never mind how; and, oh, Pussy—you can't imagine how small I felt as I came home! She is dazzling—simply dazzling! Can I wonder at his being dazzled? I am bound to admit that she is beautiful, but I don't know—I somehow can't believe that she is nice."

"Of course she can't be nice!" asserted Miss Jerrum with great decision. How could anyone be "nice" who caused pain, or envy, or any sort of unpleasant sensation to the beloved child beside her? "Probably she is just one of those heartless society girls whose head is as light as a feather and whose heart as cold as a stone."

"She does look cold," admitted Nella. "And yet she is making a love-match. Perhaps she will be all right to her husband; but what I'm afraid of is her being nasty to Viktor, when once his disgrace becomes known. Just fancy what he would suffer if she, too, threw stones at him! I can imagine so well what he must be feeling, even now. It isn't difficult for me to put myself in his place, you know," said Nella with a wistful little laugh—since I know how much it hurts to be left on one side (how could she be so stupid as to prefer the other brother?) No, Pussy, it won't do; I must manage to comfort him somehow—to get some message to reach him. I'll think it out. Of course, there must be some way, just as there was a way to see Clare Reeves. I suppose you can't suggest anything?"

Miss Jerrum could not; she never was good at suggestions. Occasionally, indeed, the form of "asking for advice" was gone through, but resolved itself into Nella announcing categorically what she intended to do, instant approval being demanded.

Yet, despite all the defects of the counsellor, Nella carried to bed a much less heavy heart than she had done to the whist-table. Perhaps, after all, Mrs. Gairdner had not been so very short-sighted when she confided

her children to the care of this monument of artlessness, who could do nothing but love (other people's children), but did so in a fashion which could certainly not—unlike her principles—be called conventional.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COOKERY BOOK.

MAGNOLIA VILLA,
WIMBLEDON,
Thursday.

"DEAR MR. VOGLER,

"I wonder if you would be so very obliging as to lend me that old M.S. cookery-book of your mother's which I have heard you mention. I'm at my wit's end for new puddings, and have an idea that some of those Austrian recipes would suit the girls down to the ground. You promised once before to lend me them, but then I forgot.

"Perhaps it would be simplest if you brought the book to the A.B.C. in Chesham-place to-morrow (Friday) afternoon. Some of us will certainly be there at 4 p.m. sharp. . . .

"So good-bye till to-morrow from

"Yours sincerely,
"NELLA GAIRDNER."

P.S. (in a somewhat less caligraphic handwriting) "Be sure to come! There's something else I want to say to you besides the recipes."

In some astonishment Viktor read down to the last word of the missive brought him by the morning-post. He was aware that between the visits to Madame Ambrosine, Nella Gairdner was subject to fits of domesticity, finding expression in mornings spent in the kitchen and —not infrequently in holes burnt in those very clothes which cost her so much thought. It was during one of these attacks that his mother's cooking recipes had been mentioned; but if any promise had indeed been given then he had never expected its fulfilment to be claimed —least of all at this juncture. And yet the mere fact of appointing an hour which still fell within banking hours seemed to argue that Nella knew of his dismissal—by this time two days old.

Why it should be simpler to take the book to a tea-room instead of sending it by book-post escaped his understanding. Another might possibly have been enlightened by the P.S., but not Viktor. To him the only explanation seemed feminine caprice, which for Nella was fortunate, since, had he guessed the motive of her action, he would certainly not have gone to that tea-room. The mere feeling of loyalty towards his late chief would have forbidden him the entrance. In this way, however, the matter seemed to him altogether too unimportant for a refusal.

Punctually though he appeared in the A.B.C. (being now, alas, master of his time) Nella was there before him. The "some of us" consisted of herself and a selection of sisters, destined, presumably, to play the *rôle* of chaperones—or of gooseberries. It was the youngest pair upon which her choice had fallen—not without reflection, as is to be presumed, since eyes and

ears of eleven and eight are not usually so formidable as such of thirteen and fifteen. In proportion to their tenderer years Amy and Aggie would be likewise more appreciative of the tea-room and more inordinately pleased at wearing their best frocks—which, by the way, did all honour to Nella's "taste"—a combination of circumstances which appeared favourable.

Perhaps it was in order to keep them in countenance that Nella herself was so exceptionally smart. At any rate, what between her get-up and a heightened brilliancy of eye, whose cause was best known to herself, there could be no doubt that she was looking her very best.

This latter fact, as well as a touch of excitement about her manner, could not quite escape Viktor's notice, and certainly struck him as disproportionate to a question of cooking recipes. But then he knew so little about women.

"It's so good of you to come, Mr. Vogler!" she greeted him with a somewhat agitated smile—"and to have brought the recipes—you have brought them, haven't you? Amy and Aggie would be dreadfully disappointed if you hadn't,—wouldn't you, children? I've been promising them quite a procession of new puddings. Do sit down, please! You don't despise afternoon tea, do you?"

While talking at high pressure she was removing her hand-bag and gloves from the chair between herself and Amy.

"Where is the book? Oh, thanks! I may keep it for a little time, mayn't I? I promise to take tremendous care of it—for I know how precious it is to you."

"Yes, it *is* precious," said Viktor gratefully; "not because of the puddings, though."

"I know—because of the handwriting"—she completed with a glance which was not the less sympathising for coming from the right eye alone—owing to the crinoline flower-pot, which was to-day being sported.

"Why didn't you come to tennis on Saturday?" asked Aggie at this juncture in a cake-smothered voice.

A dusky red spread over Viktor's face.

"How often have I told you not to speak with your mouth full, Aggie!" broke in Nella before he had time to frame a reply. "If you don't behave yourself, you sha'n't have any of these puddings. And, oh, don't they sound enticing! *Wiener Nockerl, Böhmische Dalken*—that doesn't mean Bohemian donkeys, I suppose?"

Amid the shrill and saving burst of laughter Viktor could not but throw a second grateful glance towards his table neighbour.

For the first time it struck him that Nella was showing the tact and discretion of a woman—*was,* in fact, a woman, and not only outwardly grown out of the short-skirted and long-maned stage of existence. The recognition of this fact struck him almost as a discovery.

If, during the quarter of an hour that followed, the ball of conversation was kept successfully agoing, without again descending upon dangerous ground, the merit was entirely hers. It was when she saw Viktor glancing towards the clock—though in truth there was nothing to hurry him—that the source of small-talk seemed abruptly to dry up.

"I know you haven't had enough cakes yet," she

observed, after a tiny pause, looking encouragingly from Amy to Aggie—"and there are ever so much nicer ones over there on the counter. What do you say to making a personal selection?"

An invitation which did not require to be repeated, in order to pair off the delighted gooseberries to a convenient distance.

Then, quick as lightning, with rose-red cheeks, Nella turned to Viktor.

"Mr. Vogler—don't think it strange, but I just must tell you that I know all about it."

"All about what?" asked Viktor, fairly startled.

"About why you couldn't go to Hamburg, and have had to leave the Bank—and—and about—everything. That's why I asked you to come here. I had no peace till I told you that I consider it all nonsense—and that, whatever anybody else may think of you, I esteem you just as much as ever, and feel so dreadfully sorry for what has happened to you. I should like to go on being friends, please."

"In spite of knowing everything?" asked Viktor, having sat for a moment tongue-tied by astonishment.

"Yes, just in spite of it all. To me you're just the same person that you always were; and I think the world—and the thing one calls Society—frightfully stupid and frightfully unjust; and injustice is a thing I simply can't stand. That's what I wanted to tell you."

She stopped, a trifle breathless, a nervous smile upon her quivering lips.

"Thank you, Miss Nella!" said Viktor, in an audibly moved voice, and looking deep into her brown eyes—almost for the first time in the whole of their long

acquaintance. What he read there, if not exactly a revelation, stirred at the very least a suspicion—not a welcome one, as matters stood, nor exhilarating; though, had his mental vision not been dazzled by another and more brilliant image—it was well calculated to exhilarate. As it was, he only felt touched and comforted—yes, distinctly comforted. It was something to have found somebody who trusted him as blindly as this—who was ready to stand by him in the midst of this new abandonment.

"You understand, of course, that it is only because of the justice of the thing that I say this to you," explained Nella in a hurried whisper, just as Amy and Aggie arrived, laden with fresh provender. That last meeting of the eyes seemed to have shaken her self-possession, so, at least, argued the colour of her cheeks.

"And one other thing," she added in an urgent whisper; "beware of Mr. Beesly! He is your enemy."

To this, being already engaged in a hurried leave-taking, he found no opportunity to reply.

From the moment that he had surprised Nella's secret Viktor felt that he had no further right to be sitting here—virtually alone with her. It was an obscure feeling of guilt that drove him from the tea-room.

But once in the street his thoughts left Nella to fly to Clare. Nella's own words had but served to point the way. Ah, if they had fallen from other lips, how infinitely sweeter would have been their sound!

What like would be those other words which doubtless awaited him? How would Clare receive the news of his dismissal? Around this point for two days past his thoughts had been turning obstinately. Would she

not question him more closely still than she had done on the subject of the directorship? Would not this new mark of disfavour arouse her suspicions—when it reached her ears—for, so far it had not reached them. In the two days elapsed since his departure from the Bank he had neither seen his brother nor communicated with him. What was the use of hurrying on a meeting which Viktor's small aptitude for telling lies must make awkward, if nothing worse? Postponement gave him at least a little more time for framing these lies. But postponement cannot be indefinite; sooner or later a "bad quarter of an hour" would have to be passed.

With those thoughts in his mind he opened the door of his room—to find himself face to face with Max, ensconced in an armchair, his fair-skinned face looming from out of a cloud of cigarette smoke, much as the countenance of an angel looms through another sort of cloud.

At the sight of Viktor the cigarette stump was hurled into the fireplace, Max being already on his feet.

"I say, Viktor, what *does* this mean?"

The tone was one of frank perplexity—and in the questioning eyes the same perplexity stood written.

As Viktor closed the door behind him he knew that the "bad quarter of an hour" was upon him already.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DUPING OF MAX.

"WHAT does this mean?"

Max repeated his question in a slightly ascending tone.

"Went to the Bank to look you up, and was told you weren't there. Naturally this made me suppose you were ill—seeing your respect for Bank hours. So I put the question, and was only stared at in return. Did I actually not know that you had left for good? That made me look like a fool, I can tell you. Nothing to be got out of the young idiot who informed me, so came straight off here and have been kicking my heels for quite half an hour, though I know Clare is waiting for me. But I couldn't go without hearing from you what it all is about. You can't surely mean to say that old Gairdner has given you the sack?"

"Why can't I mean to say that?" asked Viktor, advancing slowly into the room, and talking slowly, too, with the sole idea of gaining time. "Such things happen, you know. Did you suppose me immune against dismissal?"

"But, Viktor—after all these years—and you the apple of his eye! It can't be seriously meant!"

"I can assure you that it is very seriously meant."

"But why, Viktor?—in the name of the improbable, why? You can't have fallen out with Gairdner, surely?"

"Yes, that's exactly it," said Viktor, snatching at the chance offered. "I just fell out with Mr. Gairdner —rather seriously. There was a difference of opinion, words passed between us, and—maybe I was a trifle hot, presumed upon my position, you know—and, in short, it ended with my walking out of the Bank, and with his letting me go."

Max had sunk back into the armchair, and sat staring at his brother, aghast. The quasi indifference with which he had received the failure of the Hamburg plan could not stand before so startling a turn of affairs.

"I suppose that means that you were sore about the cancelled appointment, and let him see it? That's where the difference of opinion came in?"

"Yes—yes—that was it," Viktor hastened to agree.

"Viktor! *You* to act like that!—model of steadiness as you always were. What on earth has come over you? I don't understand it at all."

Viktor could almost have laughed. Of course Max could not understand it—must be kept from understanding it—at any price.

"Oh, it isn't much of a problem, that I can see"—he remarked with an elaborate attempt at lightness. "I tell you that I lost my temper."

"And your head, too, it would seem. But Mr. Gairdner isn't a fool; he must have seen that it was only that, and is sure to want to make it up again."

"No, I am certain he won't do that," said Viktor, with a conviction that caused Max to look at him more attentively.

"Then you think this is irrevocable?"

"I know it is."

Max brooded for a moment, then spoke in a tone almost of personal aggrievement.

"What on earth will the Reeves say to this? What will Clare say?"

"Does she know?" asked Viktor quickly.

"How should she? since I myself knew nothing until this minute. And, by the way, you might have dropped me a line, instead of leaving me to find it out from those gaping youngsters. Felt awfully like a fool, I can tell you; and I don't fancy looking like a fool," added Max with an increase of the aggrievement.

Viktor laughed artificially.

"What was the use of writing? Bad news travels fast enough, anyway."

"And what do you intend to do now?"

"To look for other employment, of course, but I haven't set about that yet."

"Well, at any rate, that oughtn't to be difficult to find, with the references which Gairdner can't, in common decency, refuse to give you—in spite of the quarrel."

To this, Viktor, with his head turned to Max and apparently engrossed with a knot in the cord of the window-blind, made no answer.

"I suppose you'll try and get into another Bank?"

"I haven't made any plans yet. I'm not even sure whether I shall stay in England."

"Going back to Austria?" asked Max in a tone of astonishment.

"No, certainly not to Austria," said Viktor precipit-

ately, and then feeling angry with himself for the precipitation.

"The world is big, after all," he added by way of causing a diversion, "it doesn't consist of England and Austria alone."

Nothing could save the pause that followed from a touch of awkwardness.

Max sat silent, watching Viktor's movements—a new alarm in his eyes. A certain obscure uneasiness which had been stirring in him since the beginning of the interview seemed to have found food.

Could it be? No—surely it could not be. How on earth should they have found out? Such things happened in books, but not in real life—not, at any rate, in what Max understood by life. For him the Past had been drowned in the Waters of Lethe—not because he was in the least heartless, but partly because his nature was better at forgetting than at remembering, and partly because the present was so much more important and so much more absorbing. The wild suspicion which had visited him was an impossibility, he told himself; yet an impossibility which somehow he shrank from closely investigating. If there was egotism in this shrinking, it was Viktor who was responsible for it, far more than Max himself; had he not cherished and nourished this habit of thinking exclusively of oneself, by his absurd principle of self-sacrifice? And if he reaped the usual reward of the Quixote, who else but himself had he to thank for it?

Max knew that it would only require one question to Viktor in order to settle the point. And yet when he left his brother's lodging only a few minutes later,

the question had not been asked. It is even possible that the fear of that question forcing itself to his lips, against his own positive will, had as much to do with the curtailment of the visit as had the fact that Clare was waiting for her betrothed. If a dupe, he was at any rate, a willing one. The mere thought of any possible disturbance of the present blissful state was not a thing which he could, by any possibility, face. What good could come from digging up the bones of the Past? From raising ghosts long laid to rest? Before he was half-way to Grosvenor-place the ghosts had left him. How should they not, with so many living and palpitating delights beckoning to him from the close prospect of a week—since the day fixed for the consummation of his bliss was no further off than that?

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORM.

On the very morning of the day on which Viktor had drunk tea in Chesham Place, Mr. Beesly came to the most momentous resolution of his life.

All day long, right through the stress of business occupations, it had been shaping itself in his mind—from a rudimentary conception it had been slowly becoming a coherent whole. But not until he had reached the solitude of his own room did the fact stand complete before him; and that fact was that he was going to put his fortunes to the test by proposing to Nella Gairdner. And with the least possible delay. This for several reasons, the first of which was a devour-

ing impatience; the second, a certain mistrust of his own moral courage. For he remained perfectly aware that it was a tremendous venture, especially for him personally—his rather inconvenient faculty of viewing himself "from the outside" being highly detrimental to self-confidence.

But now the necessary courage had been generated by circumstances. His rival was off the field, and had left it openly disgraced. It was only reasonable to suppose that he was definitely done for, even in Nella's own eyes. From her father's lips she must have heard the corroboration of the Austrian's guilt. It was unthinkable that this should not have settled Vogler's account, once for all. She would be hard to convince, Beesly knew; but by this time she must be convinced; her eyes be opened to the unworthiness of the man on whom she had wasted her first affections. Of this unworthiness Beesly himself had no reasonable doubt. Whatever else was dishonest in him, his belief in Viktor's guilt was perfectly honest; for the stepchild of life was accustomed to think but meanly of human nature.

"I will do it to-morrow," he said to himself now.

A more favourable constellation of circumstances was not likely to occur again. True, their parting of last week had been *brusque,* almost inimical. But this was only another reason for hurry; for any strain in his relations to Nella was a thing which Beesly knew that he could not possibly endure for another week, just as little as he could endure any further uncertainty. The matter must be cleared up at once, one way or the other. And surely—ah, surely it could only be the one way! Was not a quick reaction—a strong revulsion of

feeling—almost unavoidable? Beesly had heard of hearts being caught in the rebound, of iron being struck when it was hot, and upon such comforting sayings his confidence fed; for he knew her impulsiveness, and did not half know her innate loyalty. How would this carefully nurtured confidence have drooped had he been able on that afternoon to throw one glance into the tea-room in Chesham Place.

"Yes, I will do it to-morrow!" he repeated, trembling with the excitement of the thought. It was one which had danced before his eyes for years, like some tantalising will-o-the-wisp, too illusive to be grasped. How often had he attempted to fire his own courage, and how often failed! What fluctuations of hope and of despair had he not undergone! Sometimes unable to sleep for happiness when she had given him a brighter smile than usual, at others standing deeply depressed before his own reflection in the glass, for this unfortunate man had no more illusions about his personal appearance than about his moral characteristics. Was it possible to imagine Nella's arms around that lean neck? Nella's lips upon—— But no; at such moments even to think out the thought seemed sacrilege. And could she ever be expected to call him 'Cornelius'?—that thrice unblessed name, which in itself had always been a separate thorn in his hyper-sensitive flesh—painfully aware as he was of the absurdity of the contrast between it and its bearer. A Roman helmet on the head of a pickaninny—that was how it struck himself.

But, for all that, he was going to do "it" to-morrow, and trembled at the nearness of the prospect.

When the moment came, he made the most elaborate

toilet that the contents of his wardrobe allowed, but shook his head sadly as he reviewed the result in the glass. He was one of those men who, however much soap they use and however perfect their razors, always look unwashed, and almost unshaven—just as even the most expensive clothes appear shabby the moment they are donned by one of these essentially dingy individuals.

Angrily Beesly turned from the glass, fearing for his own resolution.

On the way to Wimbledon, he scanned the sky anxiously through the window of his compartment. If it rained there would be no tennis, which would not suit at all, since the garden certainly offered better chances for a *tête-à-tête* than did the house. And the colour of the bank of clouds slowly building up in the West seemed ominous. Just as Mr. Beesly put his foot onto the Wimbledon platform his ear was accosted by the first rumble of thunder.

As a rule he walked to the villa; but that rumble moved him to the quite unusual extravagance of a cab. It was a thing which really went against his nature; but when he reached the Gairdners' home without a drop having fallen, he stopped regretting his shilling.

The company, racket in hand, were already assembled upon the tennis-ground, and in a hurry to begin.

"If we make haste we might get in one set at least before the deluge comes!" decided Nella, who, contrary to Mr. Beesly's expectations, seemed to be in great form to-day.

"All right!" agreed Daisy, "let's race the clouds! Oh, there's Mr. Beesly! He'll be wanting to play."

"Ready!" said Nella; which could scarcely be called a reply. Apparently she had not heard the mention of his name; just as little as she seemed to perceive Beesly's person, which yet came amply within the range of her vision. Although he had done his best to catch her eye, he had not yet succeeded in eliciting any recognition of his presence. That meant, of course, that she had not forgiven him for last Saturday's disclosures —that she bore a grudge against him as the bearer of bad news. Under the stab of terror which this thought brought him he almost reeled, but quickly recovered himself; his purpose more fixed than ever. At all costs, and at all risks he *would* know his fate—*would* be rid of this devouring uncertainty. To-day he felt himself wound up to the requisite pitch; but would he be able to reach it a second time? It was to-day or never.

Nella's mood, indeed, baffled him. He had looked to finding her broken down, or at least cowed; instead of which he saw her flushed, brilliant-eyed, with an air almost of triumph about both her manner and her speech. How explain this? Could she have weathered the shock as quickly as all that? So much the better, of course—in one sense—reflected Beesly. How should he know that the look dated from yesterday only; that the spark which puzzled him had been lit in the tea-room in Chesham Place? Why, even Nella herself was astonished at the relief which that short interview had brought, at the lightheartedness engendered by the mere fact of having succeeded in giving that sign of sympathy, of having established a new link between her and the man she loved in spite of everything. And by something else, too. For Nella was perfectly aware of

having—for the first time—been looked at—not as a child, but as a woman. Intuition had been quite sufficient to detect the subtle difference, and to make her heart beat high—not exactly with hope for how should she hope, having once seen Clare Reeves?—but at least with a sort of wistful satisfaction.

All this Beesly could not know; and, though puzzled, he was far from despairing. After all, it would not be the first time that a woman had been swept off her feet by the sheer strength of passion—of such a passion as at this very moment was hammering in his pulses and racing through every vein in his body.

It was for fear of betraying himself prematurely, and thus frustrating his own object that, having hovered for a few minutes, quite disregarded, on the edge of the tennis-ground, he wandered off restlessly towards the depths of the garden—skilfully steering clear of the spot where Mr. Gairdner, watering-can in hand, was consulting the sky as to whether or not it was going to save him the trouble of watering his flower-beds. While Beesly paced the gravel path which led to the rose-smothered summer-house in which Viktor Vogler had told so many of his fairy-tales, he was racking his head as to how to create the opportunity he required. Not an easy matter, since the bursting of the first thunder-cloud would mean a stampede in the direction of the house. Clearly it was folly—in the interest both of his hopes and of his hat—to remain so far away from it. What was he doing here? The better policy would be to get between Nella and the house. Already, with another restless movement, he was turning to retrace his steps when, from out of the shadow of the summer-

house, a white, diaphanous cloud suddenly wooed his eye, and at the same time quickened his heart-beats—for it was something that he knew by sight and intimately connected with Nella, having as yet seen it nowhere but upon her head. Now it lay upon the table, like a drift of white mist, in which a spray of the very crimson ramblers that climbed over the summer-house seemed to have got entangled. No more than a garden-hat—but, at the same time, an anchor of hope. Should he possess himself of it and earn her gratitude by restoring it to her intact before the rain came on? No; there was a better way. From all he knew of Nella's habits he felt sure that, let the cloud burst ever so suddenly, she would not abandon her favourite hat—a recent acquisition, as he was aware—to its fate. She would come here to fetch it; and then——

With accelerated heart-beats he once more scanned the sky. No mistake—the rain was coming. Already an ominous current of air was making the laurels turn pale by displaying the underside of their leaves, and sending a shiver of apprehension over the close-cropped lawn, which shuddered like the back of some frightened animal. Lashed by the rising wind the long rose-sprays floated out upon the air, as though seeking to escape from their tormentor, but able only to send a shower of crimson petals to join the single leaves and dry stalks which the storm was beginning to gather before it.

"If she comes at all she must be coming now," thought Beesly, quickly stepping within the shadow of the summer-house, for it was time to take shelter—and besides, it would be better if she did not see him from afar. Upon the table the cloudy hat, with black velvet

ribbons wildly a-flutter, was quivering all over through its transparent white body, as though on the point of taking wing. Beesly, as he almost reverentially laid one protective hand upon its brim, was straining his ears in the direction of the tennis-ground. Already the first big drops—singly and far apart—were falling on the gravel outside. If she did not come now—or if she sent one of her sisters——

Then he gave a little gasp of terror almost as much as of delight; for the sound he was listening for had come—the swiftly running steps he had expected—the right steps, too—he could not be mistaken. He knew that his calculations had been right, and that the decision of his fate was close.

A moment more and she appeared breathless in the entrance—breathless and too much blinded by the change of light to see more than the white hat upon the table, at which she hastily grasped. It was only when it seemed to stick there that she perceived the hand upon the brim, and, with its aid, detached from the shadows the immovable figure to which it belonged.

"You—Mr. Beesly?" she panted, obviously startled. "What on earth are you doing here? Oh—taking care of my hat—is that it? Keeping it from flying away? That's very kind, certainly; but please give it me now! I am going in. Ah—what are you doing with it? And what——"

For, with a surprisingly rapid movement, Beesly had slipped behind her, and now stood in the rose-draped doorway, which even his narrow figure sufficed to block, holding the garden-hat in both hands—carefully, indeed,

but with an air of extreme determination. He had not exactly reasoned out this part of the programme. His taking possession of the hat had been largely instinctive. She would not go without it; therefore, so long as he held it she would not go at all—thus he more felt than told himself, as he faced her with the gage in his shaking hands.

"Give me my hat!" said Nella, suddenly haughty; "and let me pass. I am going in, I tell you. It will be raining in a minute. Just hear that thunder-clap!"

"You can't go in until you have heard me," said Beesly speaking with the energy of desperation. "And, besides, it is raining already. Both your hair and your hat will get wet if you go now. Look!"

Nella looked and saw that it was true. At the thunder-clap, as though at a signal, the single drops seemed to have joined into a series of miniature torrents, of which the spray blew in even to this sheltered spot, suddenly cooling the hot air. Upon the roof overhead a series of tiny drums seemed to have set up their monotonous beat.

Impatiently Nella turned away to sit down before the rustic table. Virtually she was a prisoner here for the next ten minutes at least. As well get over at once what she saw inevitably coming.

"What is it you want?" she sullenly enquired. And then added more impatiently:

"You may as well get properly under shelter, I'm not going to run away in this deluge. Even though you don't mind the rain I'm sure my hat does."

Beesly, too excited to have noticed that his shoulders were drenched, came a step nearer, moving stiffly.

"You know what I want. I want *you*. I have never wanted anything else. You must know that I want you."

"And you might know that you cannot have me—ever!"

"Why not, Nella?" he breathlessly asked, coming yet a step nearer.

To this she vouchsafed no answer. Silent and sullen she sat before him, tearing to pieces some rose-leaves that had drifted onto the table, and doing her best to keep up the scorn upon her face, although secretly she was a little frightened by the new aspect of this usually so insignificant person. A lightning flash had shown her a quite new determination upon his strangely white face, which as yet she had seen only in the shadow of the gathering storm.

"Why not, Nella? Now that that other—the man of whom I have been, ah, so furiously jealous—I confess it—has been proved unworthy of you—why should it not be?"

As though touched by a red-hot iron she turned upon him with blazing eyes.

"Who says that he is unworthy of me—or of anybody? What are you daring to take for granted?"

"But surely you know"—stammered Beesly, so taken aback by her vehemence that he almost dropped the hat he still held—"and not through me alone. You have questioned your father; did he give me the lie?"

"No," she said, relapsing into defiance—"he did not."

Triumphantly he asked:

"Well?"

Then she made no reply.

"Well? You see for yourself that the story of those four weeks' imprisonment was no calumny. Is not his dismissal proof enough? I suppose you are aware that he is dismissed?" Beesly asked precipitately.

"Yes; I am aware of that," said Nella, somewhat anxiously watching Beesly's hands, which were grasping the garden-hat far more tightly than could be good for its delicate constitution.

"Then you must also believe that he stole that overcoat?"

"That he took it, you mean. Yes—I believe that, too. At least, I believe in the possibility."

"Well?" He stared at her, perplexed, "you can't mean to say that that makes no difference to you?"

"Can't I? That just shows how little you men understand! I don't know whether he took the overcoat or not—and if he did I don't know what his reasons were, but I am quite sure that they outweighed the apparent immorality of the act."

Again Beesly stared, clutching the unfortunate hat a little tighter. For a moment there was nothing heard but the swish of rain among the leaves, and the miniature drumming overhead.

"Then you mean that he has not sunk in your estimation?"

"Not by a hair's breadth. In my mind he stands exactly where he stood before the arrival of that vile letter."

"And in your heart, too!" sneered Beesly, losing the last vestige of mastery over himself. "Do you deny that you care for that—that felon?"

"I am far too proud of loving such a man as Viktor Vogler—in case it is him you mean—to think of a denial."

Nella's face was almost as crimson as the crimson rambler as she said it, but her eyes did not sink before his.

The ugly sneer deepened around Beesly's bloodless lips.

"Then you love a man who does not love you. Or do you imagine that he returns your—sentiments?"

"I know he does not," said Nella quietly and sadly, while slowly the rich colour ebbed from her face.

"And how do you know that he will ever do so? How do you know that he does not love another? The hurry he was in to get back to town that Saturday—you know the one I mean—gave you cause for reflection—I know it did—and me as well. His future sister is very beautiful—and, after all, she is not yet his sister, though she will be so next week, I hear. He is in love with somebody—I have watched him, and I know the symptoms—too well. But it is not with you. You need hope for no return."

"It is a poor sort of love which counts only on a return," said Nella, unshaken, yet with quivering lips.

For another moment he contemplated her, in the silence of consternation. So his calculations had been false, after all! Her loyalty so staggered him that he had to wrestle for his breath. In the moment that he got it passion broke bounds at last.

"No, it is not a poor sort of love that wants a return!" he burst out with an intensity that caught Nella in a new grip of fear; "it is the right sort of love that

wants its reward—that cries for what it wants and cannot rest until it gets it! That is my sort of love, Nella. I had to tell it to you, and it had to be to-day. I could not have waited longer. Don't talk to me of renunciation! The very word has a lukewarm sound. That you should be able to talk of it gives me hope. You could not speak so if you felt for—that man—what I feel for you. You will forget him—the man who has been blind enough to prefer another—who has given to another—what love he has to give; but it is not much—believe me! A block of a man like that, all business instincts, cannot love as I do—believe me! Nella, you must listen to me! It is impossible that such a love as mine should awake no response in you. When a fire burns, it spreads. It is in the nature of things. No—don't answer me yet: let me tell you everything. Ah, you don't know!"

And, fetching a new, deep breath, he went on speaking precipitately, in words which surprised himself, which came to him from he knew not where—painting for her the picture of that secret cult of his which almost from the first had been a passion; telling her how he had for years hung upon her looks, lived upon her smiles, rejoiced only in her presence. As he spoke he was with his left hand pressing the garden-hat almost flat to his breast while feverishly twisting the black velvet ribbons round the fingers of his right hand; but Nella had given up watching his movements. In silence she sat before him, dumfoundered by his vehemence; understanding that any attempt at an interruption was vain. It was only in the rare lightning flashes—for the brief storm was already drawing off—that she could see his features

plainly, and was startled each time afresh by the ghastliness of his pallor, the intensity of the small, dark eyes. She was frightened at his manner far more than that one close thunder-clap had frightened her, but she was touched as well. In much that he said she recognised feelings, hopes, desolations of her own. At moments she seemed to be listening to the story of her own secret love, which she had carried about for so long in her child's heart, unsuspected by the man who was its object. Yes, she must believe this avowal; the sincerity of this accent was not to be doubted.

"Mr. Beesly, I believe you," she said with unwonted gentleness, in the very moment that he gave her the chance to speak. "I believe that you care for me; and I would not hurt you if I could help it, but I cannot—you must not hope anything—I cannot marry you."

He only fetched another breath, and launched into more passionate pleading. He appealed to her now, not as to the woman he loved, but as to his judge, his arbiter—as one soul appeals to another soul for the help which it alone can give.

"I know I am vile, I know I am mean and small,—unworthy of you"—he told her in a voice almost exhausted by his passion—"but you can make me worthy, you can lift me up—only you! I know you can. You have been my good genius for years—only you alone can be my saviour. A human soul, Nella! Think of the great work to do!"

But Nella, though almost in tears, could only shake her head and repeat that it could not be.

It was long before he could believe it. When he did so at last a final change came over his mood.

"You actually mean this?" he asked, still incredulous. "You will not marry me on any account?"

"I have told you so," said Nella, in whom an impatient weariness was gaining the upperhand.

"And if Vogler had not existed?—If he ceased to exist?"

"Even then I could not marry you."

Beesly took out his handkerchief and passed it across his damp forehead.

"Very well. You need not. But you shall not marry him either. I shall see to that."

"What do you mean?" asked Nella with a new fear. "What are you going to do?"

"That I can't tell you yet. But it will be something which shall put an end to Viktor Vogler—one way or the other. Oh, I shall find a way—never fear! From to-day I begin to look for it. I shall spare no pains to undo the Austrian—in your eyes, since in the eyes of the world he is undone already. If I can't win you myself, at least that thief shall not win you. Ah, it is not good to have me for an enemy. You don't know of what I am capable. Shall I tell you? Why not, since all hope is gone, as it is. That anonymous letter —it was I who wrote it. I wonder you did not guess."

Nella stared at him aghast, instinctively shrinking back upon her seat.

The movement was too much for Beesly. Once more his artificial strength collapsed.

"Don't look at me like that, Nella! Don't! I cannot stand it! It was for you I did it—because I was mad with love. I told you I was vile. Oh, will you not save me from myself? Listen, Nella. I will do nothing—I

will not hurt a hair of the Austrian's head—if only you will be kind to me!"

For a few moments more he raved on, while she cowered away from him, without a word, only dumbly shaking her head.

It was with threats upon his lips that, convinced at last of her firmness, he rushed out presently into the passing rain.

Alone in the summer-house Nella first covered her eyes with her hands, shuddering and shaking; then uncovered them again in order to gaze sorrowfully at the wreck of her garden-hat, which Beesly, before turning, had flung down upon the table. After all, even if the storm had carried it out into the garden it could scarcely have suffered more than it had done under another kind of storm.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FOOL'S ERRAND.

THAT evening Nella had another talk with Miss Jerrum —not about Mr. Beesly, whose unhappy secret she would have thought it mean to betray, even to "Pussy," but upon an apparently abstract subject, which only gradually revealed itself as personal. Something said by Beesly, in the course of the interview in the summer-house had been occupying her mind ever since, far more than did his wild declaration.

"Don't you think that every woman who is loved by a man has the right to know it?"

Thus ran the query proposed to-day in the depth of the "Confessional."

"Well, childie—I suppose so. But doesn't she usually know it? Surely, he tells her?"

"Not always. Supposing, for instance, that she is engaged to somebody else. He could not well tell her then, could he? I mean, of course, if he is a man of honour."

"No; of course not. But what would be the good, either? If she is engaged, that means, of course, that she cares for somebody else."

"But how do you know that if she knew about that other love she would not prefer it? And just think how dreadful it would be if she found it out only after she was married—when it was too late! I do think she ought to be given the chance so long as there is still time. Don't you, Pussy?"

To judge from her bewildered stare, Miss Jerrum had evidently got no opinion ready.

"Especially," completed Nella, "when the man who loves her possesses every possible qualification for a husband."

Taking Nella's face between her two plump hands, Miss Jerrum turned it towards her.

"Childie, what are you thinking of? Whom are you talking of? Surely not of Miss Reeves, and—and *him?*"

Nella closed her governess's lips with a quick kiss.

"How dreadfully clever you are, Pussy. Whom else should I be talking of?"

"But, deary, what's the use? And what could be the possible good? She is very much in love, they say —and almost married."

"*Almost,* but not quite. That's just it, Pussy. Just now there is still time; next week it will be too late; I heard that to-day, and I heard other things, too,—things that show me that my suspicions were well founded. He cares for her, Pussy, and he is unhappy; and I can't bear the thought of his being unhappy. Don't you understand?"

All that Miss Jerrum could understand was that the "child" was worried, and very evidently meditating some project before whose probable extravagance—since experience here supplemented knowledge of human nature—her simple soul quailed.

"But it wouldn't be any good," she repeated helplessly. "It's the other brother she cares for."

"Who is not to be compared to Viktor. If she knew herself loved by him, it seems to me impossible that she should not prefer him."

"But you don't know him, deary, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I've seen him at the Bank, a regular beauty man; barber's block sort of fellow. How could he be compared to Viktor?"

"But if she likes this sort of man she is not likely to like the other sort," argued Pussy with a flash of real commonsense. "And, besides——"

"Besides what?"

"About that overcoat, you know," faltered Miss Jerrum, positively blushing. "She might not look at it in the same light as you do.

"She would need to be a fool if she didn't. What's an overcoat, weighed against such a love as he has to give? At any rate I think her eyes ought to be opened to the existence of that love."

Pussy gazed aghast.

"Surely you are not going to write to her? Why, you have never been introduced."

"As if conventional considerations had any place where the happiness of two lives may be concerned."

"But it would be so—unusual."

"Am I given to doing *usual* things?"

"Then you are actually going to write?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. I've not got it quite into shape yet; but I feel that something is coming. Perhaps I shall have more to tell you to-morrow. Good night, Pussy."

She had almost reached the door when Miss Jerrum, having heaved herself out of her share of the armchair, arrived just in time to throw her arms about the slight figure.

"But, childie, if you do anything of that sort, and supposing anything to come of it, you would be taking away your own chances. Oh, please, please reflect!"

A little impatiently Nella freed herself from the detaining arms.

"Even *you* don't understand, Pussy! It's no use explaining. Please let me go."

* * * * *

"The train falls as it should, does it not, Miss?" asked Clare's maid, on her knees, while with deft fingers she settled the *crêpe de chine* folds.

"Yes, if falls as it should," said Clare, with her satisfied eyes upon her own image in the glass.

Clare's mother said nothing, but sat with ecstatically clasped hands, awed into speechlessness by the beauty

of her daughter in the wedding-dress donned for the final rehearsal.

Owing not only to the lovers' impatience, but also to certain social considerations, dictated by the waning season, the engagement had been of the briefest. One more day, in fact, would see its completion. Yet, despite *trousseau* cares, aggravated by high pressure, the bride-elect had found time to give her thoughts to other things besides both—to a certain change of mood in Max, for instance, who lately, right through the ardour of his love-making, had shown a preoccupation which might almost be called depression. He had become reticent, too, strangely reticent, about his brother, who had not shown himself here for weeks, despite repeated invitations. That the subject distressed him became clearer each time that he was questioned; but nothing else was clear,—at any rate, not to Clare. The displeasure she had felt at the failure of the Hamburg appointment stirred again, mixed with the same suspicion which had caused the juniors of the Bank to surmise that there must be "something behind" this. To one who had been brought up to value the "salutations in the market place" even higher than guineas, it was a distressful thought.

"Yes, the train is all right," she now pronounced, "but Madame Séraphine will have to do something to the lace. She has not nearly made the most of it. Fortunately, she has a whole day before her. Who's that? Come in!"

It was a housemaid who entered, with a card upon a salver, a rather young and inexperienced housemaid, who had not yet learned to control her emotions pro-

perly, and fairly stopped short at sight of the resplendent white figure.

"What is it, Mary? A visitor?"

"Miss Gairdner," read out Lady Reeves from off the card. "But we don't know her a bit. She must have come to the wrong house."

"Gairdner?" repeated Clare, with a note of interest in her voice. "Let me see the card?"

"The daughter of the banker, I suppose. I daresay she hopes to be asked to the wedding on the strength of Max's brother being under her father. But we really haven't any room. How awkward! Hadn't Mary better say that we aren't at home?"

"Please, ma'am, I told her already as how you were," confessed Mary.

"How tiresome! I suppose I shall have to see her."

"It's not you she wants to see, my lady; she said very particular as it was Miss Reeves she had business with—pressing business—that's how she put it."

"Business? What an extraordinary idea! What are we to do, Clare?" asked Lady Reeves in a flurry.

"I shall see her," promptly decided Clare; in whom curiosity was astir.

"Show her into the *boudoir,* Mary; here, alongside."

"Up here, Clare? Why not downstairs? I can go down to her, if you like, while you are changing."

"I am not going to change. It would take too long. Why shouldn't she see my dress, after all? I daresay she will like it," added Clare with a confident smile upon her smooth lips.

When a couple of minutes later the door of the *boudoir* opened to admit the long-trained white figure,

Nella, utterly forgetful of the usages of the society to which she was supposed to belong, confronted it, dumb and rigid. A moment ago all her nerves had been tingling with the excitement of her enterprise, but now, abruptly, they settled down into an ecstasy of admiration that was almost calm.

Part of the night that was passed had been spent in alternately concocting epistles and destroying them. It was when the paper basket was full to the brim that the plan of a letter had been dropped in favour of that of an interview. After all, to speak was much easier than to write, and it was impossible not to say either too much or too little—upon paper. Beyond being taken for an escaped lunatic by Miss Reeves, what could happen to her? And that would not matter, so long as she had done what she could for Viktor Vogler's happiness.

And there was another thought tempting her—the prospect of seeing Clare Reeves near, of being able to dissect at close quarters that beauty which had captured Viktor.

But now, as she stood before this queenly creature in wedding garments, Nella's courage suddenly deserted her. The very sight of the white dress told her that she had come on a fool's errand. Instead of explaining her presence, she stood with clasped hands, doing nothing but gaze.

It was Clare who opened the interview, in a wonderfully mild voice, for she had noted and rightly construed the dumfoundered aspect of her visitor.

"I must apologise for receiving you thus," she said graciously; "but I did not want to keep you waiting,

as I understood your business to be pressing. Will you not sit down?"

Clare herself sat down as she said it, skilfully managing her train, and looking across encouragingly at her visitor who, beyond a single broken exclamation, had not yet spoken.

"I am quite curious," she added, by way of helping this tongue-tied girl out of her difficulties, "as to what your business is. I don't think we have ever met before; or am I mistaken? Among so many introductions, you know——"

Then Nella burst out.

"I don't think I have any business, after all! That is your wedding-dress, of course? When do you mean to wear it?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"The day after to-morrow!"

Nella sank upon a chair, morally overwhelmed. "I did not know it was quite so near as that, or I should not have come."

"But why not, Miss Gairdner—since it seems that you have something to say to me? It would not even be fair, after having aroused my curiosity in this way."

"The day after to-morrow! You would only think me mad if I said what I came to say; and I suppose it is rather mad."

"But I want to know," said Clare, with quickened attention. "Does the thing you want to tell me concern my marriage, in any way?"

"Yes; that is just it. It is something that I thought you ought to know. But how can I tell you now, since you have quite made up your mind? You *have* quite

made up your mind, have you not, to marry Mr. Max Vogler, in any case—even if——"

"Even if what?" asked Clare with a change both of face and voice. A new, sharp suspicion had touched her, as with the edge of a keen knife. Into her grey eyes there came that inquisitorial look before which Viktor had quailed. Critically they passed over Nella's face and figure. Decidedly she was rather pretty. Perhaps even capable of turning a man's head. Memories of things she had heard—and not all out of novels—about concealed entanglements—revelations made in the eleventh hour, surged up right through her supreme self-confidence. Could it be that Max was—no better than other men?

"You cannot stop there," she said sharply. "You have something to tell me. Is it something that might prevent me marrying Mr. Vogler?"

"I thought it might—but——"

"Then you must tell me. And please begin by telling me since when you have known Max,—my future husband? I don't think he has ever mentioned you."

Nella's eyes opened wide.

"But I scarcely know him at all; I have only just seen him at the Bank, when he came to visit his brother."

"Then what can you mean by saying that you have something to tell me which may prevent my marriage?"

For a moment longer Nella stared, then abruptly understood.

"Oh, so it's *that* that you imagine!" she cried, turning an indignantly scarlet face upon Clare. "You think that I have come to plead for myself—that I am

your rival—and so I am, in a way—but it has nothing to do with Max Vogler."

"With whom, then?"

"With his brother. I shall have to tell you now, of course, or you will imagine—heaven knows what. I don't think I have ever spoken to Max Vogler; but I remember the other ever since I remember anything; it really is no wonder that I should have guessed his secret."

"What secret?"

"So you really have not guessed it? That is because your eyes were held. If they had not been, you must have seen that he is madly, hopelessly in love with you."

"Nonsense!" said Clare, on the impulse of the moment, and then stopped short to reflect. With the passing of the danger which had seemed to loom, the tense look was gone from her beautiful face, leaving only amazement pure and simple, followed by a rapid review of her brief intercourse with Viktor. Accustomed though she was to numerous and facile triumphs, this idea had certainly never occurred to her.

"What on earth makes you think so?" she asked, still half incredulous.

"I have observed him, and so have—other people. He is quite changed, and exactly from the time when he first saw you. Anyone can see that he is in love, and also that he is unhappy. I am sure it is you; that explains the unhappiness."

Clare looked down reflectively at her own white hands, lying in her white lap.

"And why do you think that I ought to know this?"

"Because—don't you see—there is still time. You are not yet bound irrevocably. You care for the other

brother now; but once you know that Viktor loves you, you will look at him with different eyes; that is only natural; and perhaps you will——"

"Change *fiancés* at the last moment? I see; prefer him to his brother!"

Clare almost laughed, partly with the relief of the peril escaped, partly in frank amazement at the proposal she guessed at.

"Don't laugh!" said Nella angrily. "I am not joking; it is a dreadfully serious thing. And, believe me, he is far the better man of the two. I swear to you that he would make you happy."

"You seem to know him very well," said Clare, smiling quite kindly at Nella; "so well that I wonder you don't undertake to make him happy yourself. For, of course, it is *his* happiness that you are concerned about and not mine. Am I right? Oh, never mind answering me if you don't want to. I know without your telling me that you came here to ask me to marry the man whom you would much rather marry yourself. Really, a rather quaint idea; and you are rather a quaint person, too. I am quite glad to have made your acquaintance. But I can't oblige you, really I cannot. Because, you see, I happen to care for Max quite as much as you care for—no, don't glare at me! I am not going to say anything more, except that you really deserve to gain him—as I have no doubt you will yet."

Leaning forward—carefully, so as not to crush her trimmings—Clare bestowed an encouraging little pat upon Nella's hand.

"With *your* memory to contend with?" exclaimed

Nella with a ringing accent of hopelessness. "Impossible!"

Clare smiled more radiantly. Though compliments were cheap things, they never became unwelcome. Especially when the accent was so naively sincere as this.

"Don't lose heart, Miss Gairdner! I shall soon be out of the running. Once I have become his sister, he will settle into the right groove—never fear! And, after all, you have such opportunities. He visits you at Wimbledon, does he not?"

"Not now, not since he left the Bank."

"Left the Bank? But I thought he was your father's private secretary?"

"So he was until lately; but surely you know that he has been dismissed?"

"Dismissed?" repeated Clare sharply; "dismissed by your father? When?"

"About a fortnight ago. I made sure you knew, or I would not have mentioned it."

"I know nothing. Max has not said a word. This is very strange. And what was the reason?"

"I—I can't tell you," stammered Nella, taken aback by this evident amazement. "Some stupid story—a report; I am sure he has got enemies."

Unable to bear Clare's probing gaze, Nella rose abruptly.

"I had better be going. I have done what I came to do."

Clare, too, was on her feet already, her satin brow deeply ruffled.

"And you really will not tell me? Don't you think that this, too, is something that I ought to know?"

"No! no! there is nothing to tell—I mean it is all nonsense. Please let me go, Miss Reeves. I—I have nothing more to do here. It was kind of you to listen to me at all."

CHAPTER XVII.

IN A WINDOW EMBRASURE.

When Nella had made a rather hasty exit, Clare first stood for a few moments with her brow still laid in folds, then reflectively returned to the bedroom and to the hands of her patiently waiting maid.

While she was being divested of her bridal finery her eyes were no longer on the mirror, nor her thoughts occupied with the instructions to Madame Séraphine.

So, after all, there *was* something behind it, as, even before Nella's visit, she had darkly surmised. What had been mere guess-work then had become certitude now. The girl's evident flurry, the words which had escaped her, spoke too loudly. After all, private secretaries were not dismissed like cooks. Max was hiding something from her. But what? Of course, she must find out, since doubt on such a subject was intolerable. So close a connexion as a brother-in-law could not be allowed to remain under a cloud. He must either be cleared, or he must be—disavowed, as vigorously as circumstances permitted.

The fact that the suspected man happened to be in love with her—which she saw no reasonable ground to doubt—could not here fall into the balance. Beside

the other discovery made, this one almost disappeared. She had no time to occupy herself with that now, since the first thing she had to do was to "find out." Not through Max, of course—from whose fraternal solicitude the undisguised truth was not to be looked for. She would have to manage without him.

By the afternoon of that day, Clare already knew how she was going to manage. By dint of casting about for some possible channel of information she had remembered that Tricksy Ballantyne, one of her quasi-intimates—though intimacy was not much in Clare's line—had mentioned that her newest "flirt" hailed from the Gairdner's Bank—also that the Ballantyne's last "At Home" was coming off this very week. It was the combination of these two facts that gave shape to her determination.

When, next morning, Clare announced her intention of attending the Ballantyne "At Home," Lady Reeves was mildly startled.

"But can you possibly find time, darling—with all the things you have still got to try on?" she questioned, by way of an indirect protest. "And the disposal of all those flowers to be seen about?"

"If I couldn't find time I wouldn't think of going."

"I'm sure nobody will expect it of you—at this moment."

"So am I, mamma; but I happen to expect it of myself."

Lady Reeves, nonplussed, sat silent for a moment: then asked resignedly:

"Will you get Max to fetch us here, or to meet us at the Ballantynes?"

"Neither: I am going without him."

"On the eve of your wedding-day?" blurted out Lady Reeves, now thoroughly taken aback.

"On the eve of my wedding-day," repeated Clare, unmoved; then, perhaps, as a concession to her mother's obvious perplexity, added with a smile, "I am not afraid of Max being jealous."

Lady Reeves said nothing more. The idea of Clare showing herself to-day in public, unaccompanied by her betrothed, struck her as very nearly indecent; but, being a well-brought up mother, she kept this opinion to herself—for the trenchant tone in which Clare spoke was one against which this dumpling of a woman had never succeeded in stiffening her moral consistency.

So to the "At Home" they went, despite dressmakers and florists, and, owing to the density of the well-dressed mob, escaped causing the sensation which Lady Reeves had feared.

To discover, firstly, whether the quarry she hunted formed part of the mob, and secondly to run it to earth, was not the easiest of tasks; but nothing could baulk Clare, once her purpose was set.

Nor did she lose time over roundabout ways.

"Tricksy," she said at the given moment, laying immaculately gloved, detaining fingers upon the sleeve of her friend, whom the frenzied exercise of hospitable duties was causing to shoot past her with unseeing eyes. "I want you to introduce me to that young man of yours you told me about—if he is here, as I suppose he is. He *is,* isn't he?"

"Yes, he is; but what do you want to do with him?" asked Tricksy, somewhat mistrustfully scanning

the other's exquisite face, very advantageously set off by a gown of a blue as faint as though it had been the gleam of ice.

Tricksy herself was a small, bright-eyed slip of a girl, as mobile as a lizard and almost as slender of limb.

"To inspect him, and see whether I approve," smiled Clare, condescending to *badinage* for convenience' sake. "Considering your shocking taste in admirers I have grave doubts on the subject; and, according to your accounts, the case seems rather serious."

"Almost as serious as your own. And, by-the-bye —how do you come to be here at all? I thought it was to be for to-morrow?"

"So it is; for which very reason I had a fancy for sporting my freedom once more in the face of the world. There—go and fetch the youth, like a good girl! I really want to talk to him—but nothing else, mind! No reason for alarm; I'm almost a married woman, you know."

Somewhat mystified, Tricksy darted off, and presently returned with a red-cheeked, slightly goggle-eyed youth in tow.

"Here he is!" she concisely announced. Then in a lower voice to Clare: "I give you ten minutes."

She was gone again, with one backward, still mistrustful glance from out of her mobile eyes.

"Do you like this crush?" asked Clare as soon as the crowd had swallowed up Tricksy, "because I don't. How about that window embrasure?"

A moment later they stood in a nook, past which the crowd surged as do waves past a haven.

He had begun by staring at her with the slightly dazzled eyes that most men turned upon her at first sight, and had gone on to ask her whether she wanted a cup of tea. But Clare did not want the tea, and had at present no use for dazzled glances. Considering the imminent peril of interruptions there was nothing for it but to go to the point as straight as decency permitted.

"Are you a candidate for the post of private secretary?" she asked him point-blank, the moment the initial inanities had been successfully surmounted.

"Private secretary?" echoed Calcott goggling a little more acutely.

"Yes—at your Bank. I hear the post has been vacated—rather suddenly. It was an Austrian, was it not, who used to enjoy Mr. Gairdner's confidence?"

"Yes—an Austrian—Vogler by name, quite a nice fellow."

"And how has he managed to forego it? Is it a fact that they quarrelled?"

"It wasn't exactly a quarrel," hesitated Calcott, torn between his natural communicativeness of disposition, and a certain reluctance to washing the dirty linen of the "House" in public—though, to be sure, this window embrasure had nothing of a public character about it, and the clear, grey eyes of his questioner were peculiarly compelling.

"If it wasn't a quarrel, then it must have been something else," was Clare's next unanswerable remark; and—still reluctant—Calcott admitted that it had been something else.

"Something unpleasant, of course?"

"Well, one isn't usually dismissed *minus* warning

for pleasant reasons, is one?" sniggered Calcott, writhing under the glance of the compelling eyes, much as an impaled insect writhes on the pin of the entomologist.

"How true a remark! No wonder unpleasant things are said about it. There *are* unpleasant things said about it, are there not?"

"Not likely to be as unpleasant as the truth," blurted out Calcott, as the communicativeness gained the upper hand, together with the natural desire to satisfy the curiosity of a beautiful woman.

In the hurry of introduction he had failed to catch the name of this stunning creature — whom Tricksy Ballantyne—with whom he had lately been having some splendid times—had so suddenly sprung upon him—so remained blissfully unaware of any more urgent reasons for discretion.

At his last words Clare's finely pencilled brows contracted sharply.

"The fact of the matter is," she said, suddenly dropping her voice to a confidential tone, in order glibly to improvise, "that a friend of mine is rather taken with Mr. Vogler; and if there really was anything serious to be said against his character I should feel it my duty to advise her against the match."

"I should think you would!" grinned Calcott. "One wouldn't advise one's friend to marry a convicted thief, would one?"

"A thief?"

Clare said the words sharply, and with a visible start, for nothing half so black as this had presented itself to her mind.

Then, after a pause of consternation:

"You mean that he has been—that he has defrauded money?"

"No—nothing as big as that, only bagged an overcoat—at Vienna, years ago—and was locked up for four weeks, in consequence. Of course the chief had no inkling of this when he took him on; it was the Hamburg affair that brought the matter to light. Got a warning from a business connexion—head of paper firm that was to supply new house—so the report runs—and seems to have put the question to Vogler, and Vogler not to have denied. That was the real reason, you know, why the Hamburg appointment got squashed."

"But that can't be possible!" protested Clare, almost defiantly.

"It's bound to be possible, since it's true."

Calcott's tone was slightly aggrieved as eagerly he went on to give her the details of the case, as the surest means of vindicating his veracity. The anonymous letter had to be mentioned, of course, but only as bearing out the testimony of other incontestible facts, which were dwelt on with an emphasis which could not fail of its effect.

Nor did it fail.

Stiff with horror, Clare listened to every word of the dreadful disclosure.

"And I read that letter with my own eyes!" said Calcott, revelling now in his *rôle* of informant, and rolling these same protuberant orbs in his head as though calling them to witness of his words. In the same instant he awoke to the fact that the "stunning" creature was taking the information in a way calculated to awaken grave misgivings as to her neutrality in this affair.

"It was very long ago, after all," he observed by way of modification.

To which Clare replied in a voice which rang like metal:

"That cannot prevent it's having been."

"And very far away."

A remark to which she made no answer at all, but only stared at him in a way which somehow convinced him that she did not see him.

"Perhaps you would like a cup of tea now—or—or a drop of brandy?" he suggested, startled by her extraordinary pallor.

"Thank you, I want nothing at all," was her brief reply. "And I won't detain you any longer," she added with a queenly gesture of dismissal, just as Tricksy, in the process of a hunt round the room, parted the curtains of the embrasure.

"Oh, so that is where you have hid yourselves?" she exclaimed, with a distinctly annoyed laugh. "Done hatching your plot by this time, I presume?"

"Yes, I have quite done with Mr. Calcott," said Clare, superbly.

"That's just as well, since I believe Lady Reeves is looking for you." And in a rather vicious whisper, Tricksy added:

"That's been a good deal more than ten minutes!"

* * * * *

"I don't think we were so very much noticed, after all," said Lady Reeves, in the privacy of the homeward-bound brougham.

But Clare offered no opinion on this subject. In a curiously tense silence she sat by her mother's side,

her brilliantly glittering eyes turned persistently to the window.

After a few timid efforts at conversation, Lady Reeves sank back into her corner. After all, it was no wonder if on the eve of to-morrow Clare's mood should be somewhat strange.

On the threshold of the drawing-room the impatient Max awaited them.

"At last! I thought you were never coming! And what an idea to——"

"I shall be down in a minute," said Clare, giving him her hand instead of her lips; "I am only going to get rid of my hat."

Then, in a lower tone:

"Please wait for me in the conservatory; I want to speak to you alone."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BETWEEN TWO ABYSSES.

ALONE in the conservatory Max waited with an impatience not unmixed with trepidation. There was nothing in the least unusual in Clare wanting to speak to him alone, but there had been something rather unusual about the voice, and the glance with which she had said it. Maybe only the shadow of to-morrow's emotions—speculated Max, while wandering aimlessly between fuchsias and bougainvillæas. Did not the whole house breathe an atmosphere in which wedding-favours seemed to float? And had he not had to wait for five minutes on the door-step—in the company of a florist's

man—because the butler had been occupied in checking off the delivery of champagne for to-morrow's *déjeuner?*

As he paced about restlessly, Max was passing his hot hands over the shining leaves of evergreens, and letting the fine threads of exotic grasses run through his fingers, by way of cooling their fever.

"Max!"

He turned to see his bride of to-morrow, stepping through the doorway, still clad in the pale-blue gown which made her look like an Ice, instead of a Snow-Queen.

"At last!"

In his hurry to reach her he half knocked over a flower-pot; but, after two paces only, stood still abruptly.

"What is it, Clare?" he asked, arrested by the look in her face as effectually as by a gesture. Now he knew also that her evasion of the caress with which he had greeted her but a few minutes back had been no accident.

"It is," said Clare, having first carefully closed the glass door behind her, "that you have deceived me."

"Clare!"

Haughty surprise rang in his voice as he drew himself proudly up.

She waved off something with her hand.

"Oh, not that! I don't mean anything as vulgar as that. It is not common unfaithfulness I am reproaching you with; and yet it is a sort of disloyalty, too, to have concealed this thing. Max, how could you dare to conceal it?"

"What thing?" asked Max, his spurious haughtiness

abruptly relaxing, and his voice grown faint under a shock of terror, which, to the uneasiness working within him since his last interview with Viktor, was like the upspringing flame to the smouldering embers. Literally, at this moment he could almost feel his flesh creep.

Then he added desperately:

"I don't know what you are talking about." And this he only said because he feared that he did know.

"I can see that you do. Oh, why beat about the bush?" exclaimed Clare, pinning him down with her eyes as she had pinned down Calcott. "Is it true, or is it not true, that your brother Viktor purloined an overcoat in Vienna, and was locked up for four weeks? —in other words, that he is a convicted thief? Is it true that this is the reason of his dismissal from the Bank, which you likewise hid from me?"

From what mysterious reserves of his nature Max drew the strength of not dropping his eyes before Clare's he was never able to understand; but the fact remained that he bore her gaze. To flinch in this moment would mean instant exposure, this knowledge it was that steeled his nerves. During the pause that followed, he was visited by the fancy of standing between two abysses, into one of which he must necessarily fall, seeing how slippery was the ground beneath his feet. On one side the peril of losing Clare—now, in the eleventh hour—on the other that of losing his self-respect, and this time irrevocably. If ever it was to be redeemed it could only be now. It crossed his mind that this was the moment for throwing himself upon Clare's mercy, trusting to her love for absolution.

For one thrilling moment he thought he was going to do so; and when Clare said again impatiently:

"Is the story true or not?"

It was almost with astonishment that he heard his own voice replying:

"Yes—it is true."

There was a miniature rustic seat among the plants, and Clare sank down upon it, as though overcome by the admission.

"And was punished by four weeks' imprisonment?"

"Yes—he was in prison for four weeks," said Max, feeling free at last to look at other things than Clare's eyes, and fixing his own upon a peculiarly fine head of fuchsia, which, to his excited fancy, seemed to be putting out at least half-a-dozen tongues at him. The last statement was a strictly true one, yet the speaking of it brought no relief.

"And this dreadful—this disgraceful fact you actually hid from me?"

"How could I not hide it, Clare?" he asked, in a low voice of anguish.

"Although you knew my principles—my horror of everything that is not perfectly fair—perfectly clean and above-board?"

"For that very reason, Clare. How could I disturb and distress you with an old affair which had been buried for so many years that it seemed done with—quite done with? I never dreamt—Viktor never dreamt—that anything more would ever be heard of that wretched overcoat!"

"I suppose you thought that because it was not Viktor whom I was going to marry, the matter would

not touch me at all. But you might have known me better. I have told you often how I hate stains of any sort, and this stain on the family name will fall upon me as well, since I shall have to bear the same name as your brother—a name down in the Vienna police-books!"

She raised her clasped hands from her lap and let them fall again, as though to demonstrate the atrocity of the situation.

"To think that I should come to having a purloiner of overcoats for my brother!"

Once more it appeared that the very smallness of the offence was in itself a fresh offence.

The contempt in her voice lashed up what still remained of loyalty in Max.

"You must not speak of him like that, Clare!" he said, bending suddenly over her, in order to seize her nervously resisting hands between his own delicate, yet strong ones. "He does not deserve to be condemned like that. To begin with, he was a mere boy when it happened."

"As though the boy were not father to the man!"

"And then the circumstances were very peculiar; we were in the deepest want."

"People who steal things are usually in want of them," said Clare sullenly, and gazing straight over her lover's shoulder.

"Yes, but it was not for himself, it was for me that he wanted that overcoat, Clare—for me! whom he saw shivering with cold, and whom he watched over as tenderly as ever did my mother—to whom he gave up his share of everything!"

He almost flung away her hands, to stand upright

before her, pouring out the story of the past—after his own fashion—pleading for his brother's supposed fault as passionately as Viktor had pleaded for himself in Mr. Gairdner's office, and, thanks to a ready tongue, far more eloquently.

Still sullenly defiant, Clare sat listening, but soon was more gazing than listening—for Max, his features illuminated by the ardour of his theme, his eyes alight with a very passion of anxiety, was a picture fit to scatter all objections.

How nobly he felt towards his brother—thus ran her thoughts as she listened—but, above all, how magnificent to look upon was this man whom she was to belong to to-morrow! For one brief moment she lost sight of the family disgrace, in order to indulge in a fleeting day-dream. But quickly she returned to realities. It was in order to punish her own weakness that she said in a voice that still strove to be hard:

"All this cannot alter the fact that Viktor is a convicted thief. If I had known this when first you spoke to me——"

"Clare!" interrupted Max, from whose face the flush of eagerness faded abruptly into pallor (was it possible that he had lied in vain? sold his soul in vain?) "does that mean that you are going to cast me off—*now*—because of that wretched affair?"

Then it was, while she looked at him critically, as though to gauge her own strength of renunciation, that Clare's eyes turned to that semblance of stars, which had struck Viktor so forcibly at his first visit.

Suddenly she rose to her feet, in order to lay her white arms about his neck.

"No," she said in one of those rare moments of a passion which somehow contrived to live beneath the snow and ice, "I do not mean that! I cannot cast you off, Max, because I cannot do without you!"

And their lips met greedily in the long-deferred kiss.

For an endless moment they stood motionless among the greenery, her fair head dropped to his breast, thoughts of to-morrow making their brains whirl.

It was Clare who recovered first.

"Ah!" she said, as with a long breath she released herself, pushing her disordered hair off her forehead, "After this never dare to doubt my love! If I did not love you above everything—even above honour—I could never marry you—now, to be called Vogler! But it is no use. I cannot do without you. I have to forgive you for being his brother. But him! him I will never forgive—never speak to him again, if I can help it."

At this Max's agony broke out afresh.

"Clare," he pleaded with all his soul in his eyes, "you say that you love me, and I believe it; that means that you will not do anything to distress me—will not be hard on Viktor. He has suffered enough, as it is. Think of his dismissal! Don't ask of me to shame him, as I should have to shame him if you do. Be kind and forgiving—for my sake! After all, remember that it was for my sake, too, that he—did what he did. If it had not been for that overcoat who knows whether I should be alive to-day—whether we would ever have met!"

At this she pressed a little closer to his side.

"You are asking much of me, Max," she murmured, visibly wavering.

"Only what I know your kind heart will grant. Remember that Viktor is to be my best man to-morrow. It will depend upon you whether his position becomes awkward—even painful. Any coldness on your part could not help being noticed. Spare him, Clare—spare him—for my sake!"

"That is taking an unfair advantage of me," said Clare, but said it smiling. "Well, I suppose I shall have to speak to him, after all. It is true that appearances have got to be kept up. I only pray to goodness that this dreadful story will not spread—will not reach papa's ears!"

"Promise me that you will be good to him!" urged Max, looking deep into her transparent eyes.

And she promised, but, ungrudging forgiveness not being in her nature, did so with a certain reserve in her mind.

CHAPTER XIX.

TO-MORROW.

"REFERENCES essential." "Young man experienced in book-keeping wanted for important post. Holders of good references apply."

"References! References!" from every column of the advertisement sheets he was turning, the word stared Viktor in the face.

A study of these sheets had been, of late, his chief occupation. Not that he was in immediate want—the three months' salary had staved off that evil moment—but every day of the present state of inaction brought

it nearer. He had begun by placing advertisements, whose composition had caused him much labour, but, owing to the want of that essential, references, they had led to nothing. And the essential must necessarily remain unattainable; for how refer his would-be employers to Mr. Gairdner, whose business conscience he knew to be of the most scrupulous! It would only be placing the banker in a painful dilemma, without doing himself any good. This seemed to be one of those lanes that have no turning; and across the path, like a roaring lion, stood the implacable "References."

With a gesture of discouragement he flung down the paper, and, going into his small bedroom alongside, took from the wardrobe his black frock-coat, in order to assure himself that not a speck stained its well-brushed nape, not a button called for consolidation against to-morrow's festivity. This settled, he possessed himself of a small leather case, and, having pressed the button, stood gazing for a full minute at the miniature brooch it contained—no more than a golden safety-pin, upon which was strung a small diamond. It was his wedding-gift to Clare, purchased to-day in despite of the melting funds, and which he would take with him in his pocket to-morrow—for it was his fancy to present it himself to the newly-made wife, and, perhaps, see her fasten it in the breast of her white gown, where he knew it would flash like a frozen dewdrop.

Ah, to-morrow—that terrible, beautiful to-morrow! How he dreaded it and longed for it, since, while placing an insuperable barrier between himself and Clare, it would, at least, show him her face—not seen for what seemed to him an eternity, not, at any rate, since the

catastrophe of his dismissal, of which he supposed her aware. It was for fear of the disapproval in her eyes that he had avoided Grosvenor Place; but to-morrow, surely, there could not be room there for anything but her triumphant love.

Ah, happy Max! Happy Max!

He was still standing with the open case in his hand, when the sound of a movement alongside struck on his ear. In his absorption he had not noticed the opening and shutting of the outer door. As he re-entered the sitting-room a familiar figure huddled into the easy-chair, the face buried in the hands, was the first object which arrested him.

In astonishment he approached, and perceived that the shoulders were heaving. Quickly pulling away the hands he saw the tear-stained features of the man whom he had just been enviously apostrophising as "happy!"

"Max!" he exclaimed in boundless amazement—"to-day!"

Then, without warning, Max sprang to his feet and pushed his brother from him with a vehemence of gesture which made the robust Viktor reel.

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!" he almost screamed; "I'm not fit to be your brother! I'm a wretch! a wretch!—the greatest wretch that ever breathed air!"

As, dumb with amazement, Viktor looked into Max's discoloured and convulsed face there seemed to him to be but one reasonable explanation of this phenomenon; a brain turned by excess of happiness.

Had he seen his brother some twenty minutes earlier, standing on the doorstep of the house in Grosvenor

Place, he would have known that there was another explanation. For a full minute Max had stood there, apparently only lighting a cigar, but in reality undergoing the fiercest emotions of his hitherto careless life. Free of the glamour of Clare's presence, he felt himself seized once more by the sense of his own indignity. If the hand which held the match was unsteady it was because he was literally shaking with self-disgust. For, despite all appearances to the contrary, Max was not, at heart, a cur. To ease himself of this load of baseness which oppressed him had suddenly become a necessity; and, a hansom passing at this moment, he hailed it and gave the address of Viktor's lodging. He had not been able to confess himself to Clare—but to Viktor he felt that he could speak—simply because he counted for less.

"I'm a wretch, Viktor! I'm a wretch!" he repeated wildly. "Do you know what I have just been doing? Betraying you—selling you as basely as any Judas could have done!"

"Betraying me to whom, Max?"

"To her! to Clare! She asked me, and I had not the courage to deny."

"She asked you what? Deny what? Max, try to calm yourself and to explain! You will make yourself ill."

He had laid a soothing hand on Max's shoulder, but it was shaken off impatiently.

"Leave me! I will explain. I forgot that you don't know that *I* know."

"Know what?"

"The reason of your dismissal. It was like you not

to tell me, and it was like me not to dare to ask"—he laughed, half hysterically—"though I suspected: I know now that I did suspect."

"And she knows it, too?" asked Viktor precipitately, terror starting to his eyes.

"Yes, she knows—through whom or how I cannot say—but she knows. I have come straight from her and from admitting the fact of your imprisonment, which, of course, implies your fault. Oh, why does the earth not open to swallow up the poltroon that I am!"

While he raved on, stamping about the room in his anguish, Viktor stood aghast, not at the wild words which he scarcely listened to, but at the thought of Clare's scorn. All along it had been the fear of seeing himself condemned by her which had been the bitterest drop in his cup. To what point had she condemned him? This he felt pushed to know.

"What did she say exactly?" he asked abruptly, in the midst of one of Max's frantic tirades.

"Oh, don't ask me to repeat! You can picture it for yourself, surely!"

"But I do ask you to repeat. I think I have the right to that, at least. She was horrified, of course? Tell me, Max—was she not horrified?"

"How should she not be? You know how high her principles are."

"She looks upon me as an ordinary thief, I suppose?"

"She was very excited," stammered Max—"we were both excited."

For a moment Viktor stood silent. Then he asked:

"And in spite of this she will marry you?"

"Yes, she will; but she could not if she knew the truth; I know she could not; it is against her nature."

"She will hate seeing me to-morrow," mused Viktor, attentive only to his own thoughts and looking down at the open case which he still held in his hand. It occurred to him, with a mental shock, that the moment of handing over the frozen dewdrop could not fail now to be a rather painful one.

"No, no!" Max was saying with the insistence of terror; "there won't be any difference—she has promised me that! I could never stand by and see you spurned—even by her! I have told her that the overcoat—that you did it only for me, that—oh, Viktor, I can't go through with it!" cried the wretched man, reeling under a fresh onslaught of despair. "Say but one word, Viktor, and I will undo it all again, I will go back to her now—this moment—and tell her that I am the thief, and not you, and leave the rest to her decision. I cannot live in this lie. I will tell her the truth."

"*To-day?*" asked Viktor, closing the little case with a decisive snap, "with to-morrow so close? Max, you are raving!"

"No, I am only coming to my senses. Remorse for what you have undergone would kill me."

"But I am not undergoing anything half so bad as you picture to yourself. I stand alone; my disgrace weighs upon nobody but myself." As he said it the picture of Nella's agitated face crossed his mind's eye for one fleeting moment, only to vanish again. "Nobody's happiness depends upon me, while upon you depends the happiness of Clare."

"Can it be to her happiness to marry the craven wretch I am?"

"You are not craven, since you are ready to speak if I demand it; whereas I only ask you to be silent. To speak now might, perhaps, help me to a situation, but would never comfort me for seeing that what I have done has been uselessly done. I said something like this to you in Vienna—that time when the policeman came—and I say it again, and you will listen to me again—you must! Do not deprive me of the fruits of the sacrifice I so gladly made!"

"Viktor, I cannot stand it," groaned Max, "your generosity will kill me."

"I am not generous—only logical. A thing begun must be carried to the end. To undeceive Clare now would not be for either of our good. You have said yourself that she would not marry you if she knew how matters stood."

"She would spurn me!" said Max with a shiver.

"And you would die of it. I see it in your eyes. Max, by the memory of our mother, who consigned you to my care, do not force me to look on at the ruin of your life!—and of hers," added Viktor lower.

Then, after a second's pause:

"It is growing dark, Max. When again it grows dark——"

Under Viktor's gently compelling hand Max had sunk back again upon his seat.

"Ah, Viktor, you are more to me than a mother!" he said in a voice from which the shrill accent had departed, gazing up at his brother with eyes of child-like trust.

"I must not expect to be anything to you—after to-morrow," smiled Viktor, pressing his fingers hard around the little leather case.

"To-morrow!" came from Max's lips in the vague voice of one murmuring from out of a dream.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FROZEN DEWDROP.

"I SUPPOSE it must be admitted that white suits her."

"The most improbably handsome pair I've seen married this season."

"If there's anything in heredity their children should be young gods."

"To think of her making so poor a match!"

This last remark was the only one flavoured with satisfaction instead of with sugared grudge. To the mothers of unbeautiful or less beautiful daughters there was consolation in the thought. For these observations were falling exclusively from feminine lips. The men said much less, but presumably reflected all the more, and looked almost as much at Max as at Clare, with a sort of astonished envy. In the church she had been no more than a vision, but here, within the precincts of the home she was about to quit, she became a reality, and at the same time a feast for the eyes—an apotheosis of the shimmering white of satin, of the waxen white of orange-blossoms, among which the rainbow flash of a diamond ornament put the only touch of colour.

Never before had the Reeves' handsome reception rooms contained so many representatives both of wealth and rank, nor so fine an assortment of the upper stratus of the medical profession. There were earls here who had lain upon Sir William's operation table, and duchesses whose vital organs and whose children's throat-glands had made acquaintance with his surgical knife. Even a minor royalty was not awanting, to give the last touch of lustre to the brilliant assembly—one of those whose more than blue blood had flowed beneath that same dexterous knife. The renowned surgeon himself was in great force. His affability was indeed, to-day, stupendous, though tinged with a touch of that "stand-off" which seems to defy criticism. True to his adopted attitude, the stress laid upon the romantic side of the affair to-day reached its climax. To hear him murmur with a far-away look in his eyes:

"After all, the heart is the essential, is it not?" or:

"There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream," was to set one wondering doubtfully, what Lady Reeves might possibly have looked like twenty years ago.

What she looked like to-day was the glorified suet pudding, which, thanks to a purple dress and a complexion to match, seemed drowned in a violet sauce instead of a pink one. In consequence of maternal emotion the pudding was not only more liquid, but also more shaky than usual; and to judge from the number of big tears that dropped into the glass out of which she was drinking the young couple's health, her champagne must have tasted distinctly salt.

Before sitting down to the *"dream of a déjeuner,"*

as it was subsequently described in the papers, there had been a great hum and buzz around the tables upon which the contents of several jewellers' as well as silversmiths' shops seemed to have been emptied, under the title of wedding-gifts. Some found it even more interesting to turn over the pile of telegrams; growing with each moment, and many of which were signed by royal names. More enterprising spirits had found means of inspecting the sixty-four horse-power, luxurious motor-car in which the young couple were, within an hour, to start for the romantic Welsh castle which a grateful ex-patient with a name rich in consonants had placed at their disposal for the honeymoon. To judge from the bridegroom's ecstatic countenance, he was sojourning there in spirit already.

There was but one preoccupied face at the festive board—that of Viktor, who in all this brilliant bustle had not found the opportunity of presenting his small gift. While viewing the heavily-laden tables in the room alongside, he had almost blushed for the little case in his pocket; yet was determined on the presentation, if only as a means of having a direct word with his new-made sister-in-law. Neither the hasty greeting in the sacristy of the church, nor the necessarily public felicitation after the ceremony had brought him any satisfaction. He wanted to know whether it was only in his fancy that he had seen her shudder as her eyes first fell upon him, and whether it had been by a mere chance that, while barely touching his hand, her glance had missed meeting his. Whatever it was, he wanted to know the worst.

With this craving in his mind he kept his eyes

upon her, for fear of missing the moment of her withdrawal.

The last toast drunk, there was a general movement. While the bride changed her dress, the company were to take another look at the wedding-presents, Sir William being determined that not one of his guests should miss the start of his own especial wedding-gift —the motor-car.

Now was his chance—so felt Viktor—his last possible chance. As he saw Clare slip out by a side-door, and having assured himself that Max was safe in the hands of Lady Reeves, who appeared to be collapsing upon his neck, he quickly turned the other way, knowing that by crossing an outer room he would be able to intercept her before she reached the staircase. A sudden boldness had seized him, for which the tiny drop of champagne he had drunk could not be entirely responsible.

"Clare!"

She turned in astonishment, at the very foot of the stairs. At sight of her interpolator her lovely face hardened suddenly.

"What do you want?"

"Only to give you this—to ask you to accept it. It's a wretched thing—a mere trifle; but between brother and sister——"

He stopped, aghast at his own audacity.

With a hesitating gesture Clare took the case which he was holding towards her. As she opened it the little diamond, under the touch of a passing sunbeam, seemed to break into scintillating dust. The look of

pleasure which came to Clare's eyes betrayed that she was a lover of jewels.

For a moment she let it play in the light, almost dreamily; then something seemed to overcome her, for the hardness came back to her face, the fold of displeasure to her brow.

Closing the case with a snap she held it out towards Viktor.

"No, thank you!" she said hurriedly. "I don't want it, I can't take it!"

"It is too mean a thing?—below your notice?" he asked, without touching the case.

"No, it is not that; it is very pretty. But I can't take it. You know why."

From out of the cloud of her white veil (finest Brussels) she looked at him, openly defiant.

"Will you take my hand, at least?" asked Viktor, determined to probe yet deeper.

With uneasy, almost frightened eyes, Clare glanced across the deserted lobby towards the door through which she had just passed, as though to assure herself that she was not being followed.

"I have touched it to-day."

"Yes—in public, under Max's eyes. Of course you would not want to distress him; and you scarcely did more than touch it. What I want to know now is whether you feel yourself defiled by my touch—whether here, without Max looking on, you will generously and forgivingly lay your hand in mine, as in that of a brother."

He was holding his open hand towards her as he spoke.

As she looked at him with dilated grey eyes, the

quivering fire of the diamonds on her breast—where his poor little dewdrop would never rest—betrayed her quickened breath.

"Oh—not now!" she uttered at last, in a voice half scared, yet with a sharp edge on it. "Don't ask me now! I have done enough to-day. I must have time to get used to the idea of this—this dreadful thing."

And thrusting the case towards him, she gathered her draperies about her, in order to fly up the staircase in a whirl of white.

It was a feeling almost of horror that drove her. The knowledge, so lately gained, that this man actually dared to love her, which at first had not failed to flatter even her surfeited vanity, filled her—now that she knew him marked and disgraced—with an indignation that bordered on physical repulsion.

With the little leather case in his hand, Viktor stood looking after her until she disappeared round the corner. A bitter smile pulled at his lips. He was thinking of that other day—the first day of all—on which he had seen her quit the room with her draperies gathered about her in just this fashion, and of Lady Reeves's lack-adaisical voice saying apologetically:

"Clare has such a horror of stains."

He was aware of a pain which, on closer analysis, might possibly have revealed itself as a chill.

It was, perhaps, owing to this chill, that when twenty minutes later he stood on the doorstep vigorously pressing Max's hand under a premature shower of rice which the impatience of some of the juveniles had let loose, he was rather surprised to realise that the moment was, after all, not quite so bitter as he had anticipated.

CHAPTER XXI.

"LITTLE GERDA."

"THE Snow Queen kissed Kay again, and now he had forgotten little Gerda, and the grandmother and all those at home."

Dropping to his knee the well-worn volume in his hand, Viktor stared out across the housetops. To pore over the old collection of Andersen's tales, which was one of the few relics of his boyhood had, in his enforced leisure, become a habit with him. He had always loved them; but it was only now that he seemed to be discovering their meaning.

"And now he had forgotten Little Gerda."

To his own case this did not seem to apply, seeing that he had no little Gerda either to forget or to remember; unless—unless——

Gazing away between the chimney-pots, the wreaths of smoke seemed to be weaving themselves into a likeness of Nella Gairdner's irregular but charming features.

Having contemplated them for a moment, he turned another page, and came to the passage in which Gerda finds Kay in the Snow Queen's palace.

". . . and Little Gerda wept hot tears; they fell upon his breast, they penetrated to his heart, they

thawed the lump of ice it was, and washed away the splinter of mirror that stuck there. . . . And now he knew her again, and cried exultingly: 'Gerda! dear little Gerda! Where have you been for so long? And where have I been?'"

Once more Viktor returned to the contemplation of the chimney-pots. Was it by any chance possible that Nella had shed one single tear—no bigger, may be, than the rejected dewdrop—over his misfortunes? Her kind and compassionate heart seemed to bring the thing within the bounds of the conceivable. He would have given a good deal to know. Still sore from the rebuff which he had suffered at the foot of Sir William Reeves's handsome staircase, his thoughts unavoidably turned to the one quarter in which he had met understanding and sympathy.

He himself would have found it difficult to explain his presence in the same tea-room in which this sympathy had dawned upon him, and yet he was there again, on the very morrow of the wedding. Here only, amid a wilderness of strange faces, he understood by the subtle, if inarticulate sense of disappointment which stole over him, that it was an unacknowledged hope that had led him. Gradually he became conscious of wanting to see Nella, in order to look at her in this new aspect of womanhood, of which he had so lately made the discovery. Now that the splinter of glass was out of his eye and out of his heart—the splinter of that devil's mirror which distorts all good things—there was no saying what further discoveries might yet be made.

May be it was because he had nothing else to do that he began to do something that he had never done

before—occupy himself seriously with Nella Gairdner. At any rate the unwonted inaction of his life proved a favourable atmosphere for the growth of these new thoughts. So persistent did they become after the failure of the tea-room that one Sunday he had taken train for Wimbledon, and visited the church in which he knew the Gairdner family to worship. There, in the family pew, he had a glimpse of Nella in her Sunday hat, and looking almost more serious than even the place seemed to demand. He decided that seriousness became her; made of her, in fact, a completely different person from the one he had thought to know.

But the growing curiosity remained unsatisfied. He wanted a closer view.

On the afternoon of the day on which he had been reading the "Snow Queen," and despite funds melting so rapidly as to make even a third-class ticket a serious matter, Viktor found himself on the way to Wimbledon. It had occurred to him that there ran a lane at the back of Mr. Gairdner's grounds, and that, after all, he had as good a right as another to take a walk in that lane. It had also occurred to him that occasionally, despite nets, a ball would go flying over the wall, and that sometimes it was Nella who went out by the little back door to look for it. Fixed plan in his mind he had none whatever, and seemed to himself to be acting in obedience to some blind force which it did not occur to him to resist.

The lane was deserted, and the voices on the tennis-ground beyond the wall very audible; for this was Saturday—the tennis day *par excellence*. It took a long wait and several turns down the lane before the truant

ball came flying over; but it came at last, landing almost at his feet.

He looked at it gratefully—without stooping to pick it up—then expectantly towards the door in the wall—the opening of which brought a woeful disappointment, for it was not Nella who stepped out into the lane, but —of all men in the world—Beesly.

With a perceptible start on both sides the recognition took place. Nella's word of warning shot into Viktor's mind. If this man were really his enemy, the chance was distinctly unfortunate.

Beesly seemed equally taken aback, but upon the first look of perplexity there quickly followed one of fierce suspicion. The small, black eyes, fastening themselves upon Viktor, seemed to grow both smaller and more intense.

The pause of mutual astonishment was but of a moment. Then Beesly walked up to Viktor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked with aggressive jauntiness.

The tone alone was enough to put Viktor on his mettle.

"Taking a walk," he answered coolly. "I understand this road to be public."

"So it is; but you must admit that your presence at exactly this point is—to say the least—strange, and calculated to give rise to——"

"To what?" asked Viktor, coming a little nearer to the other, in order to look him more satisfactorily in the eyes. "I will trouble you to mention to what it might give rise."

As he retreated before the menacing figure which

towered so high above his insignificant form, Beesly was cursing that temper of his which had so often outstripped his intention, and at the same time gauging the probable weight of those two huge fists which had automatically clenched by Viktor's sides. That the cuffs in which those fists were framed were unmistakably frayed at the edges was a circumstance which did not escape his notice, and, taken in conjunction with various other symptoms of social deterioration, helped him, at least partially, to regain his self-control.

"I leave that question to your judgment," he said, gathering about him the fragments of his dignity, while simultaneously lessening the distance between himself and the door.

"Mr. Beesly, haven't you found that ball yet?" a clear, young voice rang over the wall.

Mr. Beesly, who had clean forgotten the ball, made a dash for it, and then for the door, which having slammed in Viktor's face he breathed again freely.

But not by any means easily. As he handed the ball to Nella he looked at her searchingly. If she had not been playing in this set, would she have fetched it herself?

This was Beesly's first visit to Wimbledon since the day of the declaration in the summer-house. He had actually never meant to come again, but the resolve had not held good for more than a fortnight. For such renunciation as this he could not find strength in his soul. Whether she hated him or not, he could not live without an occasional glimpse of the beloved face, even though glowing in anger. He would make no further effort, would attempt no further appeal, would, in fact,

avoid being alone with her, for fear of his own hasty tongue, which had already said all that there could be to say—but to the dog-like fidelity of his attachment the mere sight of her was as necessary as is bread for the stilling of physical hunger. Like a beaten cur he had crept back to the hand which had struck him. But in the meantime, what had happened? Was it possible that his rival had been gaining an advance? In any case Viktor's presence in the lane was highly suspicious. Was Mr. Gairdner aware of this new danger? Hardly; or he would surely not be pruning his roses so placidly as he was doing over there just now. Beesly had not been thinking over the matter for two minutes before he came to the conclusion that a word of warning to his chief was not only advisable, but almost a duty.

Seizing the earliest opportunity that offered he gravitated towards the rose-bed.

"Excuse me, sir," he began, while his back took on a certain submissive curve produced by the mere presence of his chief, "I am aware that it is a liberty, but under the circumstances I think I am right in mentioning to you that Mr. Vogler is walking about in the lane behind the garden—or was doing so five minutes ago.

Mr. Gairdner straightened himself with a start, to look at his interlocutor. He disliked both him and his curved back, but the news he brought could not well be overlooked.

"Is he?" he said sharply. Then, loth to betray anxiety, added with a testy, half-laugh:

"What's that to me? He isn't planning a burglary, I presume?"

The moment he had said it he wished he hadn't; the remark seemed to apply rather too painfully well to the case in hand.

Beesly smiled obsequiously.

"I don't know what he is planning, sir, but it seems to be something which he would rather keep close. He was evidently much put out at seeing me."

"Thanks for the information, but it doesn't seem to me of the slightest importance," said Mr. Gairdner, waving the shears in a vague gesture of dismissal, as he turned his back upon the clerk.

He had lied deliberately, for to this much-tried father of a family the matter seemed anything but unimportant. To him no less than to Beesly Nella's complicity in that presence in the lane seemed almost a foregone conclusion.

Acting upon his lights, which, it is safe to say, would not have been those of the late Mrs. Gairdner—and the last guest gone—he lost no time in summoning his eldest daughter to his study.

"I've always left you a free hand, Nella, have I not?" he opened the attack. "Never scrimped you of your liberty?"

"Of course, papa," she answered, amazed.

"And, considering this, do you think it is fair play to have clandestine meetings with a person of whom you know I cannot approve?"

"Clandestine meetings? With whom?"

"None of your innocent airs, please! With whom but Mr. Vogler, of course, who has been seen in the back lane, not an hour ago."

It was the sight of the vivid rush of crimson to

Nella's face and of light to her eyes which first warned Mr. Gairdner of the bungle he had made.

"Mr. Vogler? Here? Behind the garden? To-day?" she asked in joyfully precipitate tones.

"You want me to believe that you didn't know it?"

"If I had known it, dad, you may be sure that Mr. Vogler would not have taken a solitary walk in the lane. And it wouldn't have been a clandestine meeting either—that isn't my way. Oh, no, papa! I'm all for fair play, and I give you fair warning that if Mr. Vogler wants to see me—wants to speak to me—he shall!"

The quality of the tone was such as to make Mr. Gairdner sincerely wish that he had left the matter alone.

When he dismissed Nella, briefly, it was with the miserable conviction that henceforward every ball that flew over the wall would be picked up by her personally.

Viktor meanwhile was likewise wishing his step of the afternoon undone. Beesly's appearance in the lane had opened his eyes to its extreme imprudence, while stirring up a vague uneasiness.

"Beware of Beesly! He is your enemy," Nella had said.

To be sure, what harm yet remained to be done? Dismissed and stigmatised, did it not seem as though the list of his ill-fortunes must already be exhausted?

Something of the same train of thought was occupying Beesly himself at this moment. He had said to Nella that he would find a way of undoing Viktor in her eyes as completely as he was already undone in those of the world. He had been thinking of nothing else since—but in a half-despairing and therefore ineffective fashion. It was the meeting in the lane which

drove a sharp spur into the sides of his intention. Something must absolutely be done—some means be found to make good his threat. But how? When? Where find the circumstance black enough to blacken the man whom Nella Gairdner loved?

Rack his brains as he would, Beesly could not see his way—yet clung blindly to his purpose. He had heard say that everything comes to him who waits. Well, then, he would wait—with eyes open, with attention strained. Life has so many chances, after all—and so often all depends upon seizing one of them by the hair of its head.

On the next morning Viktor received a brief note from Mr. Gairdner, penned in the panic which had followed the interview with Nella, and in which he civilly but rather peremptorily called upon him to shun the neighbourhood of his residence, "out of regard for my daughter's fair fame."

"I think I have the right to ask this of you," the note concluded; "and knowing your sense of loyalty, I count upon the fulfilment of my request."

Viktor had at any rate resolved to shun the lane, so instead of feeling depressed he felt quite curiously elated. For the warning seemed to argue the existence of a danger—and this danger must necessarily come from the side of the girl whose fair fame was to be respected.

Having despatched the note, Mr. Gairdner had told himself that he had now done all that could be done—and so he had, since no better means could have been devised for fully informing each of the two young people of how matters stood with the other than those adopted by the harassed father.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TEN-POUND NOTE.

"THE rational thing to do would be to emigrate," thought Viktor as he stared out across the roofs. "Not such a fuss made about references over there, I understand. And I suppose I could work my way out. Why don't I go?"

He seemed to be asking the question of the chimney-pots, who, in reply, only scrawled their smoky hieroglyphics upon the sky.

He had a much more favourable view of the chimney-pots than he used to have, since, in exact proportion as fortunes descend in the scale, the position of lodgings is apt to ascend. The attic he now inhabited had certain points of resemblance with the one from which the hairy Vienna policeman had fetched him away. And other circumstances recalled the old days—the circumstance, for instance, of going to bed supperless—of late a not infrequent occurrence. After eleven fat years, the lean one was not without its bitterness, yet gladly suffered as the price of Max's ransom, and, above all, as the redemption of his promise to his mother.

Maybe it was the re-plunge into poverty which had so vividly revived her memory; for whenever he dwelt on his position now it was no longer Clare's face that

floated before his mind's eye, but that of his mother, as it had done in the Vienna lock-up.

Certain importunate doubts as to the completeness of Max's happiness were given no audience. Since the eve of the wedding the supreme subject had not again been touched upon by either of the brothers in their now rare meetings, Viktor deeming it wise to restrict his visits to a minimum. Even this was painful enough —for Clare, too, despite visible efforts, could rise to nothing higher than a minimum. That Max—his married bliss notwithstanding—was suffering from the situation could not escape Viktor—had even caused him to ask himself whether, in authorising the lie in which his brother lived, he had, indeed, done him more good than harm.

Acquaintance with his own growing distress could not fail further to imperil so precarious a happiness, and must, therefore, be kept from Max at any price—which, thanks to an elaborate comedy, had, so far, been done. A series of subterfuges had kept him away from the new lodging, which he did not suspect to be an attic, as little as he suspected that the black coat in which Viktor paid his duty calls on Clare was the one presentable article in his fast vanishing wardrobe.

Of late the comedy was growing more difficult to play. With the exception of his silver watch everything that the pawnbroker would take had gone to him—the diamond dewdrop foremost. Meals first grew scantier in fare, then fewer in number. A few days ago he had virtually joined the "No Breakfast League" and had made acquaintance with a soup kitchen. Also he had discovered that he was quite clever at patching his own

boots—all except the one pair kept sacred for his calls at Ealing, where the young couple had settled down to do nothing in particular except enjoy life, chiefly by means of the motor-car, in which the country was scoured *en tête-à-tête*, Max being by this time as expert a chauffeur as he had ever been a German teacher.

Decidedly, emigration could not be worse than this, Viktor told himself. Why did he not go? It was not because of Clare: that much he knew by now. Could it be because of Nella Gairdner? Scarcely, since, recalled to a sense of duty by Mr. Gairdner's appeal, he had given up even attempting to see her. Two chance encounters in the street made up the sum of his opportunities within the last two months, and a somewhat flurried bow was all that had passed between them. It could not surely be the hope of another such meagre satisfaction which kept him from the door of the emigration office?

Another encounter made in the neighbourhood of the soup kitchen had left an unpleasant taste—that of Beesly, who, happening to pass by at the hour of distribution, had stood still, as though shot, on recognising his late colleague at the extremity of the waiting *queue*. He took a good look at him—at the home-patched boots, at the buttoned-up coat which covered mercy knows what sins of toilet, at the unmistakable marks of hunger in the face grown so rapidly gaunt. And as he looked, Beesly could not but feel a certain sense of compensation. If Nella could see him thus—in this unbeautiful setting, this so obvious social degradation! Surely that would settle his account!—unless, indeed,

it aroused her pity. No, something else was wanted in order to make his undoing complete.

Then he met Viktor's eye and involuntarily smiled: but it was so evil a smile that Viktor pulled his coat collar yet higher than he had done on the day when he had shovelled snow in the Vienna streets.

The "something" which Beesly waited for was coming at last.

It was about four months after Viktor's dismissal that Mr. Gairdner saw himself forced to apply to his late private secretary concerning the whereabouts of a certain paper filed by him, and upon which the new one (not Beesly, but a complete outsider) could not lay his hand. In a formal note Mr. Vogler's presence at the Bank was, therefore, requested for a given hour—and Mr. McFirkins, the present secretary, received the necessary directions, amongst which figured prominently that of not on any account disturbing the banker personally. The ordeal of an encounter was one which he could fortunately spare both himself and Viktor.

For Viktor himself ordeal enough remained, if it were only in the passing under the critical eyes of his late colleagues. Though he might don the sacred coat and boots, he could not wipe from his face those signals of distress which Beesly's sharp eye had already detected.

But not for that would he shirk the call of what he recognised as a duty.

With a mask of dogged indifference he passed through the room in which youngsters who had been wont to cower before him now nodded condescendingly as they measured him with impertinently curious eyes.

In the room beyond, where the search was to take place, Beesly rose with marked *empressement* from the table upon which he had been laying bank-notes into neat rows. A little contrivance had enabled him to be occupied just here and just now, so as to gain a glimpse of Viktor and assure himself of the downhill progress. The first sight of the black coat disappointed him, but a look into the face reassured him anew.

"You will be wanting the table," he said, sweeping together the rustling bank-notes. "I shall take myself off."

"And I as well," said McFirkins, who had ushered in Viktor. "You know your way about, of course. Here are the keys."

"Two would get on quicker than one," objected Viktor. "There are a lot of drawers to wade through."

"Mr. Gairdner is waiting for me. Besides, I have orders to leave you undisturbed. When you want me you need only touch the bell."

Viktor said nothing more, having understood that Mr. Gairdner was purposely giving him this sign of confidence.

The secretary went out. As Beesly—his hands full of bank-notes—turned to follow him he noticed that one of the ten-pound notes had fluttered to the ground. He stooped to pick it up, then suddenly desisted. The idea had flashed into his mind that this might be one of those chances that have to be taken by the hair of the head. Supposing he left it where it was, and then assured himself—after Viktor's departure—of its continued presence. It has been said that Mr. Beesly's opinion of human nature—largely a product of self-

knowledge—was of the lowest. And a man not quite new at the business, and as hungry as that—there was no saying. It seemed an inspiration.

The search for the missing paper took a long time, extending into the luncheon pause. It was some time after Mr. Gairdner's emigration to the restaurant that Viktor touched the electric bell.

"Would you ask Mr. McFirkins to come to me?" he said to Nicholls, who presented himself. The request was deferentially put. Even to this elderly office-boy he felt compelled to speak almost humbly.

"Mr. McFirkins is gone to luncheon, sir; but I was to call him. He's just across the street."

"At the Temperance? No need to call him. I'll step in there myself and give him the keys."

And taking up his hat he went out, glad to leave the uncongenial task behind him.

Beesly, who—as on another memorable occasion—had gone without his lunch, had heard the bell, and now stood watching the doorsteps from a convenient window. As Viktor stepped out he breathed a breath of deliverance, yet did not immediately turn, but held fast by his native inquisitiveness, followed him curiously with his eyes as he threaded his way across the street and towards the modest eating-house opposite.

"He has found the paper and is going to tell McFirkins so," was his unerring comment.

Then he turned and hurried down a corridor towards the room which Viktor had just left.

His first glance told him that the bank-note was no longer where he had left it.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again—it seemed

too good to be true. On the table he looked, and under the table—not a trace of a ten-pound note.

Here his feelings so overcame Beesly that he was obliged to sit down. So his plan had actually succeeded! What doubt could possibly remain? A starving man and a ten-pound note left *en tête-à-tête*—it had been almost a foregone conclusion.

But the doubt came, after all; supposing Vogler had gone to the "Temperance" as much to hand over the note he had found as to report the result of his search?

When McFirkins returned, ten minutes later, Beesly pounced on him with the question:

"Did Vogler give it you?"

"The keys? Yes."

"No, not the keys, the bank-note—a ten-pound note. I must have dropped it as I cleared the table, for the account squared before—I'll take my oath upon that—and I'm minus one now. There's no other explanation; Vogler must have found it."

"But I tell you that he gave me nothing, only the keys."

"I didn't say that he must have given it you; only that he must have found it."

The two men looked at each other hard. There was no love lost between them, seeing that McFirkins filled the post which Beesly had aspired to; but in consideration of his wearing spectacles and not being able to play tennis, Beesly was able to forgive him even this.

"Do you mean to say that you imply——"

"Well, considering his antecedents, the idea doesn't seem preposterous, does it? From an overcoat to a ten-pound note the step isn't so very huge, after all."

McFirkins stood silent. He had heard something of the story of the overcoat, without entirely crediting it, his opinion of human nature being not quite the same as Beesly's. But in this moment he felt shaken.

"This is rather serious," he remarked, after a pause of conscientious reflection. "You should speak to Mr. Gairdner."

"I am only awaiting the moment of his return in order to do so."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. McFIRKINS MAKES A MOVE.

"AND you are certain you cannot have dropped it anywhere else?" asked Mr. Gairdner, rather coldly, of Beesly, the latter having just poured out his tale with an eagerness which caused his tongue to trip over some of the words.

"Absolutely certain, sir. I checked off the notes immediately on reaching my own office, and found myself short of one."

"Then why did you not return at once to look for it?"

"Because I understood that Mr. Vogler was not to be disturbed."

"But in such a case—it certainly was a neglect on your part!"

"I suppose it was, sir."

Beesly could be humble at need.

"But I understood the orders to be stringent."

"This is really most annoying."

And Mr. Gairdner looked annoyed, as well as frankly perplexed. He did not on any account want to believe that Viktor had pocketed that bank-note, yet he could scarcely see any escape from having to believe it. Formerly—even after the reception of Herr Bäumel's letter—he could almost have sworn to Viktor's intrinsic honesty; but now that the impression of the man's personality was beginning to fade, it seemed more easy to believe things of him. Besides, he, too, had had a glimpse of Viktor in the street—unknown to the unconscious Viktor himself—who at that moment had been gloating over a cook-shop's window. The sight had been a shock to Mr. Gairdner, and certainly helped to make Beesly's assumption terribly plausible.

"Would it not be as well to lose no time over it?" asked Beesly, deferentially.

"Over what?"

"Over having him called to the police-station—before he has time to change the note. I have the number down, of course. Shall I telephone to the station?"

"You will do nothing of the sort," Mr. Gairdner said sharply. "I don't mean to move in the matter."

"What?" gasped Beesly—"take no steps at all?"

"None whatever. But you won't be a loser thereby," added Mr. Gairdner quickly; "I shall not hold you responsible for the loss. Shall make it good out of my own pocket. And now you can leave me, Mr. Beesly. I am busy."

It was said with so much finality that Beesly went out wordless, though deeply disappointed. A suspicion was very good, no doubt—so well-founded a suspicion

as this—but a conviction would have been ever so much better; and so firmly was he convinced of Viktor's guilt that he never doubted the result of the investigation.

All that day people who had to do with Mr. Gairdner could not but notice his worried air. Mr. McFirkins, having the most to do, noticed it most fully, and, shrewd Scotchman as he was, failed not correctly to locate the cause. Nor was it to be wondered at; seeing that he himself was feeling worried over the matter, in spite of Viktor being a stranger to him. The disgraceful truth was that, besides being shrewd, the spectacled Mr. McFirkins was likewise soft-hearted. One honest man has a way of knowing another at sight, and his predecessor had impressed him favourably on the instant. True, Beesly's words had shaken him for a space; but his too visible eagerness had undone its own work, by suggesting a personal bias. Mr. McFirkins began now to ruminate over the extreme cruelty of an unjustly fixed suspicion—all the more cruel when the victim remains in ignorance.

But need he so remain?

Having conscientiously considered the matter all day, Mr. McFirkins reached the conclusion that a warning to the suspected man would be no more than fair play.

Next morning, accordingly, Viktor received the following note:—

"Dear Sir,

"Though our brief acquaintance scarcely justifies these lines, I count upon your good will for taking them as they are meant.

"In the room in which you were to-day occupied a ten-pound note had been dropped by mistake previous to your entrance. It was not found there after you left. The inference which might possibly be drawn I leave to your own perspicacity. Although Mr. Gairdner refuses to move in the matter it has struck me as fair to inform you of this circumstance, in case you should wish to take any steps for your own justification.

"Believe me, yours faithfully,

"DAVID MCFIRKINS."

Half an hour after the reception of this missive Viktor was at the bank, not having taken time so much as to change his coat.

The youngsters at the desks—the same who had nodded pertly at his entrance yesterday—were so startled by the impetuous entrance of the gaunt figure in the shabby coat that they never even thought of smiling as he passed through their midst like a lowering thunder-cloud.

In the room beyond, Beesly could not forbear a start of sheer physical terror at sight of his rival entering with set jaw and eyes glittering unpleasantly in his suggestively thin face.

"Take me to Mr. Gairdner at once," he commanded rather than asked, glowering down upon Beesly. "I must speak to him without a moment's delay."

"Mr. Gairdner," stuttered Beesly. "I really don't know—I have no authority to—you had better apply to Mr. McFirkins."

"I shall apply to nobody but to Mr. Gairdner him-

self. Oh, I know the way! You needn't disturb yourself, after all."

With the perplexed but curious Beesly at his heels, he strode away across the room and down a well-known corridor.

Without awaiting the reply to his peremptory knock, Viktor turned the equally well-known handle.

Mr. McFirkins started forward as though to prevent the invasion of the sanctuary, but with one movement of his hand Viktor put the long, lanky body aside, and walked close up to the writing-table at which Mr. Gairdner, grown rather less florid than was his wont—sat staring at him with helpless blue eyes.

"Excuse this interruption, sir, but the matter is urgent. I am told that a ten-pound note went astray yesterday during my visit here. Is that so?"

"It is so," said Mr. Gairdner, as though compelled.

"And suspicion has been thrown upon me as the finder—the dishonest finder. Is that so, as well?"

This time Mr. Gairdner said nothing, but only stared more helplessly at his late private secretary.

"That is answer enough. And to this my answer is that I demand an investigation—an immediate and full investigation of the matter. I insist upon it; and you cannot refuse me."

He brought his clenched hand down upon the table with a gesture that caused the inkstand to rattle.

In the background Mr. McFirkins was scratching his head, and wondering whether that note of his had been wise after all, while Beesly looked simply frightened.

"Is my demand granted?" asked Viktor in a high-pitched tone, whose urgency was not to be gainsaid.

"If you insist upon it," said Mr. Gairdner, recovering himself, and aware that some sort of a dead-weight had slipped from his soul. From the moment that Viktor himself did not fear the investigation Mr. Gairdner did not fear it either.

To judge from Mr. Beesly's face it was upon him that the fear had now fallen.

"I do insist. It is my right—once my name has been mentioned in this connexion."

"In what connexion?" came a new voice from the door, which, in his flurry, Beesly had left ajar.

Viktor turned with a start—the three other men in the room turned likewise, to see Nella on the threshold, looking with wide, frightened eyes from one face to the other.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO VISITORS.

"In what connexion has your name been mentioned?" repeated Nella, advancing into the room, and looking now at Viktor alone with a glance which took in every detail of his appearance and grew more intense as it did so.

Under her eyes Viktor seemed abruptly to lose that splendid self-assertion which had upheld him so well until now—abruptly to become conscious of the patches on his boots and the darns in his coat. Instinctively he shrank back into the shadow of Mr. McFirkins, while his shoulders lost their squareness and his head its aggressive poise.

"Nothing that need interest you, Little one," said

Mr. Gairdner hastily. "This is a business talk. You must wait until I am at liberty."

In reply Nella advanced another step. Whether she had come here on her way to Madame Ambrosine, Mr. Gairdner probably never knew, for, as matters turned out, the question of *chiffons* was not touched upon that day.

"But if it does happen to interest me?"

"I tell you I have no time for you," Mr. Gairdner said testily. "Be so kind as to go away."

Here Viktor abandoned the protection of Mr. McFirkins's shadow in order to step forward.

"There is no need, Mr. Gairdner! It is I who am going. I am done; but I count on the fulfilment of my request."

With an awkward inclination to the company in general, and without daring to look at Nella, he withdrew in a hurry.

Back in his attic he sat down to think of what had happened, and there discovered that the only thing that had really happened was Nella's appearance in the office. How like a flower or a bird she had looked among those black-coated men! Where had his eyes been until now not to have seen into what the Ugly Duckling had developed!

Next he went on to wonder what could have occurred in the office after his departure. Would Nella have received the explanation she had asked for, and if so—

It was half an hour later that a knock at the door of his room aroused him from idle speculation.

He opened indifferently, and then started back in a

sort of terror, for on the threshold stood Nella, just as she had stood on the threshold of the office less than an hour ago.

"Miss Gairdner! *Here!*"

She stepped in, closing the door behind her, and as she did so he could see that from head to foot she was trembling with excitement.

"Yes—it is I—and I am here. Oh, I know all that you would say; I know exactly what I am doing. But I don't care. I have just heard the new, vile accusation that has been made against you, and I had to tell you how indignant I am. This is too much! It's a plot. I'm certain of it. I told you that you had an enemy."

"Never mind what it is," said Viktor, feeling all at once quite extraordinarily light-hearted. "I can bear it, now that I know you sympathise. Oh, Miss Nella——"

But there he stopped short, as though with a jerk.

She looked at him, half frightened, out of eyes grown suddenly shy.

For a minute silence reigned in the attic, for he had turned away without speaking; then Nella said breathlessly and uncertainly:

"Is that all you have to say to me? Why do you stop?"

In her halting voice Viktor's ear could not but read her secret, only guessed at before and to which he felt his own heart leaping in response. His impulse just then would have been to take her into his arms and cry out, "Gerda! Dear little Gerda! Where have you been for so long? And where have I been?"

It seemed as though this must be the inevitable end; and so it would have been but for a habit of iron self-

control which had been forged under hard blows. Just in time he remembered the words of Mr. Gairdner's note:

"I think I have the right to ask this of you."

That had been an appeal; and to Viktor Vogler's sense of loyalty no one had yet appealed in vain. The treacherous Waters of Lethe had not done their work.

The pitiless, the merciless past—Max's past—stood across the path of happiness as relentlessly as it had done across that of fortune and prosperity.

When he spoke it was to say dully:

"It is all. I have nothing more to say."

For a moment longer she stood there, incredulous; then, as he did not turn, her white teeth dug themselves suddenly into her underlip.

Red with shame she slipped out of the room which she had entered so impetuously only a few minutes ago.

* * * * *

That day was to bring another visitor to the attic.

Several hours after Nella's departure another knock summoned Viktor to the door. Once more he opened indifferently, to start backward in astonishment.

"Max!"

It was fully a fortnight since he had heard from or seen his brother—and the first time that Max had found his way to the latest address—greatly to Viktor's annoyance.

"What have you come for?" he questioned, with the hurry of shame-facedness, while attempting to hide away the empty soda-water bottle upon which he had been darning a sock. "If you had dropped me a note I would have come to you. My reception room isn't exactly in tip-top shape, as you see."

And he tried the effect of a laugh, which, however, Max did not seem to hear.

He was still standing just within the door, and passing his startled eyes slowly round the attic—over the carpetless floor, the curtainless window, the deal bedstead with the thin blanket all awry upon it. When they came back to his brother's face Viktor saw that Max understood.

"Oh, Viktor!" he burst out in a voice that pain made discordant. "Why did you not tell me? This is awful! It cannot go on!"

"It is not going to," said Viktor with artificial yet very effective briskness. "This is only the last scene of the old act. The new one starts on the other side of the Atlantic. It's settled now. I'm going to emigrate."

The determination might be sudden, but it was a determination. This morning had taught him that it would be safer to put the ocean between Nella and himself.

But Max was both excited and unconvinced.

"Ah, you're always just going to do something which never comes off. I see now how it has been; you have been hoodwinking me all this time. I know now why you always choose the darkest corner of the drawing-room and always sit with your back to the light—though your face wasn't as thin as this a fortnight ago. But this cannot go on. You must let me lend you money. Viktor, you simply *must*—money enough to get into a decent room, if nothing else."

"Your money, or her's, Max," asked Viktor quietly.

Again Max understood, and winced as he did so, just as Viktor had often seen him wince when forced

to witness Clare's significantly frigid civility towards her brother-in-law.

"Let us not talk of money, Max. I could do a good deal to oblige you, but even to oblige you I cannot accept your wife's charity. Let us talk rather of the object of your visit; for I am sure you came here to tell me something interesting. I saw it in your face when I opened the door."

Then Max began to recollect that his visit really had had an object. Still deeply disturbed, he began to tell Viktor of the new hope which had come into Clare's life, and his own, and gradually as he spoke the disturbance gave way to the blissful pride of the future father.

"I want you to promise to be the godfather," he said in answer to Viktor's affectionate felicitation. "That is why I came."

At this Viktor once more stiffened.

"I can only be that if Clare asks me to."

"She shall ask you," said Max, a trifle doggedly.

"Even if she should, it would be against the grain. Why demand such a sacrifice of her? Thank you, Max—I understand what pushed you to this—but you had better choose another godfather, believe me! And don't worry about me, whatever you do, I have lots more of work in me. One of these days I shall be coming back with a fortune bigger than yours. It may turn out yet that the circumstances that sent me across the ocean did me the best turn ever done to me in my life."

In the same hopeful strain he talked on for some minutes more, listened to eagerly yet unquietly by Max.

That evergreen impression of Viktor's enormous qualifications for fighting the battle of life, of the breadth of those shoulders which no burden, however heavy, could hope to break—an impression which reached back into earliest boyhood, had often before brought him comfort; but to-day his restive conscience refused to lie still under the anodyne with which it had glutted itself far too long.

* * * * *

It was on the evening of that day that Mr. Beesly, returning to the Bank after business hours in order to fetch his pocket-book which he had forgotten there, ran against Nicholls so suddenly as to cause that somewhat shaky individual to drop a handful of coin which he had been examining under the gas-jet of the corridor.

"Beg pardon!" said Beesly hastily, and stooped to pick up one of the coins that had rolled to his feet. By its glitter he had taken it for a new farthing, but a closer view revealed it to be a half-sovereign. And a little farther on lay a second, which Nicholls was groping for rather precipitately.

Mr. Beesly stood up and looked at the old servant with suddenly inquisitive eyes. He said nothing as he handed back the recovered coin, but he was thinking a good deal while pursuing his way. Among other things he was thinking that this was the empty-pocket season —as which, from personal experience, he knew the last week of the month to range. Also that during the last twenty-four hours the chronic inflammation of Nicholls's eyes had shown signs of growing acute, and the patchwork quilt been displaying tints more gorgeous even than those observed since Mrs. Nicholls's untimely end.

Furthermore, Mr. Beesly was thinking that it almost certainly was Nicholls who had answered Viktor's bell yesterday. True, no doubt had ever been cast upon Nicholls's honesty; but neither was it probable that he had ever before observed a ten-pound note lying on the floor, at what was presumably an abnormally thirsty moment—not, at any rate, since the removal of his better and stricter half had so sadly relaxed the reins of self-discipline.

These facts, taken together, afforded much food for reflection—not welcome reflection, by any means, causing, at the same time, some angry surprise—not at the frailty of human nature, in which Beesly's faith was unbounded, but at the disturbing suggestion concerning the rightful assignment of that frailty.

After all, it was a pity there was going to be an investigation.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DOCILE MONSTER.

"Is all the gear square?" asked Max of the chauffeur, just now busy in oil-stained shirt-sleeves over what looked like the entrails of some cast-iron monster.

"Yes, sir."

"Plenty of benzine in the tank?"

"Half a day's run, sir."

"That will do. You needn't dress. I'm going to drive her myself. Just bring her round in ten minutes. She does look fit, I must say!"

He stood for a moment caressing the spick-and-span

"Mercedes" with a gaze which, for affectionate admiration, was second only to that wont to rest upon Clare. Love-madness does not necessarily bar out the modern disease known as motor-madness, and in this case they had merged into each other. The car in which he had started on his honeymoon had become too much a part of that blissful span to be ever quite severed from it in thought; just as the pride of mastering the steel-muscled prodigy was akin to that of another possession; and the intoxication of flying towards horizons which beckoned ever farther on, mixed itself up inextricably with the intoxication of Clare's close neighbourhood, of the flutter of her motor veil brushing his face, of her little gasps for breath when the pace was at its hottest.

The garage at the back of the villa saw almost as much of him as did Clare's boudoir. It was there that he went by preference, whenever the realisation of Viktor's position pierced through his happiness as a sharp-pointed needle might through a glittering tissue, to wound the finger it met. To take an active hand in the oiling and furbishing up of his darling, docile monster was the best way, he had found, of diverting inconvenient thoughts. To devour space with its wheels was the most satisfactory means of bracing slackened nerves.

That was why he had gone straight to the garage on his return from Viktor's attic. He meant to invite Clare to take a run with him—not one of the breathless runs that would make her gasp—her present condition tabooed all such risks—but a smooth, soothing drive into the sunset of a peculiarly mild November evening.

As he approached the drawing-room door he heard

voices behind it. It opened almost in his face to let out Tricksy Ballantyne in a new autumn costume of the latest and most aggressive shade of green, which, more than ever, recalled the lizard.

She stopped short on the spot, eyeing him with a glance which seemed at least as aggressive, and which was rather wickedly bright, as it subsequently occurred to him.

"Ah, it's you, Mr. Vogler! We've been having such an interesting talk. Feeling in good form, I hope?"

Max, somewhat puzzled by this uncalled for concern, replied that his health was much the same as usual.

"That's all right!" said Tricksy, encouragingly. "No use in being worried—that's my maxim!"

She was across the lobby and out of the door before Max had found a reply.

"You're game for a drive, aren't you, Clare?" he asked of his wife, who was still standing in the shadow of the drawing-room door. "It's a perfectly gorgeous evening."

"A drive?" she echoed with a start. Then, after a second's pause,

"Very well—I will be ready in five minutes."

When she came down punctually, Max, leather-clad and duly masked, sat awaiting her upon the driver's seat. In silence, with his tender help, she took her place by his side, her own face almost invisible under silver-grey veils.

Cautiously, round the little sweep of avenue Max steered the car out on the road. For several minutes he, too, did not speak. All his thoughts were bent upon something that he wanted to say to Clare, and

which he was considering how best to approach. The picture of Viktor's attic was still in his mind, and would not let him rest until he had obtained something for his brother—even though it were no more than a moral compensation. His own absorption left him but half aware of Clare's strangely persistent silence.

At last they had left the houses behind them, and were gliding between two rows of stately pillars—the trunks of giant elms, whose remaining foliage the touch of coming winter had turned to bronze, and that of the setting sun to the warmest of golds. Here the road was almost straight and almost deserted. The easiest of runs lay before them.

Max cleared his throat, and with a little trepidation began:

"Clare, I have a favour to ask you. I wonder if you will grant it?"

There was no answer. He could not even be sure that she had heard. More anxiously he repeated his words.

"Have I ever refused you anything?" asked Clare, almost a little impatiently, and still looking straight ahead.

"Then you will not refuse me this. It is a small thing, after all—more a formality than anything else. Only that you should consent to let Viktor be the godfather of our little one, when it comes."

She made a quick movement, but did not answer at once.

It was now only that Max began to grow alarmed, suddenly realising how ominous had been her silence.

"You will not say 'No,' will you?" he pleaded more

uncertainly. He would have looked into her face, but, not daring to take his eyes off the road, he loosed, instead, one hand from the wheel, and groping for hers, gave it a furtive pressure which was an appeal.

With the touch there seemed to snap some bond which had been constraining Clare. She turned to him abruptly and spoke precipitately:

"You can ask that of me, Max, you are not ashamed to do that—after what has happened?—the newest thing, I mean."

Through the mists of her silver-grey veil her eyes were flashing like cut stones.

"What newest thing?" stuttered Max, entirely taken aback.

"Do you mean to say that you don't know? But you must—of course you must!"

"I swear to you that I know nothing—beyond what we both have known—all along."

"Then I will tell you, for *I* do know. I have just heard it—from Tricksy Ballantyne."

With flying breath and in tones which agitation made incisive she told him the story of the ten-pound note, confided to Tricksy by her devoted swain Calcott, and which, his back barely turned, she had flown to impart red-hot to her dearest friend, Clare. Ever since that last "At Home," and the *tête-à-tête* in the window embrasure a certain grudge had simmered within Tricksy's breast against that dearest friend. To be the bearer of a piece of news which could not fail to sting had therefore had its enticements.

As he listened, Max felt his fingers stiffening upon the wheel.

"And she dared to accuse Viktor of the theft?" he managed at last to utter, half-choked with rage.

"Tricksy? Oh, she accused nobody; she only reported the general belief of the Bank—and how can you wonder at the conclusion jumped to—considering his past?"

"But your belief, Clare? It cannot be your belief that Viktor found and kept that bank-note? Say that you don't believe it!"

Just perceptibly Clare shrugged her shoulders, looking silently ahead.

"Clare—I beg of you," said Max, for one moment turning upon her eyes whose anguish was masked only by the ugly goggles, "tell me that you don't believe it!"

"How do I know what to believe?" she said sullenly. "After what he did once before, how can one be sure of what he might not do again?"

"But, Clare, my darling! you know how it happened, you know that I was the cause."

"Take care!" said Clare sharply, "you are getting too near the ditch."

"Have I not explained to you, told you of the distress that we were in?"

"Yes, yes, you explained. It is like you to be so lenient towards your brother. But not all your generosity can make of the fact anything but an act of felony; and whether he has committed this second one or not it is bad enough that he should be considered capable of it."

"He will clear himself!" said Max vehemently. "He will insist on an investigation; see if he doesn't!"

"I believe he has asked for one," said Clare, almost

grudgingly. "But until the result is known you must not expect me to see him; really you must not. I have done what I could to meet your wishes, Max—been as civil to him as anyone could desire; but to ask of me to let him stand godfather is too much; you must see yourself that it is too much; and you know how bad any excitement is for me at present."

"I know—I know—my darling!" murmured Max distractedly. "I would not put pressure upon you. All I plead for is justice to Viktor; you will not be troubled by his sight for long, anyway, since he is going to emigrate. He told me so to-day."

"Take care!" screamed Clare shrilly and suddenly, as, round the bend of the road, a second motor came tearing straight at them.

Through his goggles Max saw it as in a mist, and wrenched round the guiding wheel—but he was no longer master of himself, nor, consequently, of his machine. The docile monster—no longer docile—had taken the bit between its teeth.

Suddenly one of the tree pillars seemed very close—so close that he could distinguish the lichen upon the bark. A convulsion—whether of his body, or of the motor, or of the earth beneath him he could not have said—wrenched through his consciousness. In his ears there was a big noise which seemed to be composed of many small ones. And after that there was silence.

* * * * *

"Are they both dead?" was the question in the mind of each of the two men, who, having stopped their car at about fifty paces distant, came running back with horrified faces.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BEST WAY OUT.

"ARE they both dead?"

The question was now put into words by one of the two men bending over the inert bodies.

"That's a matter which only a doctor can settle, I fancy. Have you any idea how it happened?"

"None, except that I suppose he must have been drunk. He had plenty of time and plenty of room. The running up against that tree strikes me as having been completely gratuitous."

* * * * *

When the doctor came he decided that—contrary to all appearances—neither of them was dead. The woman, in fact, was seemingly uninjured. As for the man, he could not say until he had examined him exhaustively, which he would prefer to do either in the nearest hospital or in his own place and in his own bed—if within reasonable distance. It was to be presumed that a calling-card would be found upon him.

But before it was found Clare came back to consciousness, and, still half-dazed, gave the required directions.

It was in the second motor-car—innocent cause of

the catastrophe—that the Vogler couple were brought back to Ealing. Here Doctor Mascott, the family adviser, having been sent for, Clare was put to bed, to recover from the nerve shock with which, contrary to all probability, she proved to have escaped—while the still unconscious Max was consulted over in undertones.

When at the end of an hour and more he raised his heavy eyelids it was to look into two unusually grave faces—of which one was strange and one familiar—bending over him at awkwardly close quarters.

At sight of the raised eyelids the gravity on both faces disappeared magically, being replaced as though in a conjurer's trick—*changez passez!*—by a confident smile—the instinctive smile of the experienced doctor, well practised in the keeping up of appearances until the very drop of the curtain.

"What is the matter?" asked Max thickly. "Am I at home?"

With a glance at the family practitioner, which was as good as saying: "I hand over the rest of this show to you"—the strange doctor stepped back.

"To be sure you are at home!" said Doctor Mascott, in his brisk, hearty voice which had put more life back into dying men than ever did camphor injection. "You had a spill with the motor, as you will remember, but we got you back all right."

"Ah yes—the motor! There was a tree in the way, wasn't there?"

He frowned with the effort of recollection.

Then the doctor saw terror shoot into his eyes.

"Clare! Where is Clare?" he asked in the hur-

ried accents of panic. "What has happened to her?"

"Nothing has happened!"—declared Doctor Mascott, almost grinning with the satisfaction of being able to speak the truth. "It sounds incredible, but the shock seems to have done her no harm—no harm at all, you understand. But I have made her lie down, all the same."

"I want to see her," said Max, mistrustfully.

"And so you shall, I promise you that you shall see her—before the night comes," he added gently. "But for awhile she must rest—I insist upon it."

Such was the conviction carried by the tone that Max shut his eyes again—satisfied.

A moment passed before he again looked up.

"You haven't told me yet what has happened to me. Is it anything very bad?"

"Pretty bad," replied Doctor Mascott, with a false show of frankness. "You haven't escaped as easily as your wife."

"But I don't feel anything hurting me—only as though I would rather not move."

"No need to!" smiled the doctor, as flippantly as he was able to.

Then, with sudden gravity:

"I take no responsibility for the consequences, if you do."

"And if I don't—if I am good and docile do you promise to set me up all right?"

The flippancy was quickly brought up again.

"Modesty forbids me to make promises, my dear

Mr. Vogler; but I won't deny that I'm famous at setting people up."

From under his discoloured brows Max looked keenly into the doctor's face, then shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again it was to glance across the room.

"Are we alone, doctor?"

"Yes," said Doctor Mascott, for his colleague had slipped out by the door some moments back.

"Then please tell me whether or not I am going to die?"

The searching look of the blue eyes was such that despite his long practice in professional deceit, Doctor Mascott winced quite perceptibly.

"Nobody but God Almighty could tell you that," he ventured, hesitating, "and I am only a man."

But the wide, questioning eyes, set in the livid and bruised likeness of what had once been a beautiful face, did not release him.

"Doctor—don't you think that a man has a right to know?—a man, for instance, who has an account to settle?"

"And you have one to settle?"

"I have something to do which only I can do,—something on which another life depends."

For another long intent moment the doctor and the patient looked into each other's eyes, then the doctor said rather low, but quite plainly:

"If you have an account to settle then do so to-day, for I cannot answer for to-morrow."

"Thank you, doctor!" said Max, and would have stretched out his hand, but feared that he could

not. Instead, he smiled right up into the doctor's face.

"You won't believe me perhaps—but it is a fact that I am glad. It's the best way out of it. I couldn't have gone on like this for ever, you see. I haven't got the necessary qualifications for a successful villain, as little as for a successful hero. But I forgot; you can't understand. No time to lose, you say? Then don't lose any in sending for——"

"Your brother? That is done already."

"That was kind, but not enough. I want Mr. Gairdner too, the banker. You will find him in the directory. Send a message at once, please—an urgent one."

"There is no one else you would like to see? Sir William, as you know, is on the Continent, and Lady Reeves in bed with influenza. So I fear——"

"No, there is nobody else I want to see. Only Mr. Gairdner and my brother; and—yes, a priest. Please send for a priest at once—the one nearest at hand."

* * * * *

When an hour later Mr. Gairdner, in deep perplexity, reached the villa at Ealing, in obedience to a peremptory summons from a doctor he had never heard of, he felt himself to be entering a house of death.

Well-meaning hands had dumped down some quite superfluous straw upon the gravel drive, and the gas-jet in the hall revealed an unmistakable look of scare upon the face of the servant who had opened the door.

At the top of the stairs he was met by the sender of the summons.

"Mr. Gairdner? Thank heaven! I believe that nothing but his determination to see you has kept up his hold on his consciousness so long."

"But are you sure there is no mistake?" asked Mr. Gairdner, flurried and breathless. "I can't imagine what he wants of me. I never had anything to do with this one. It was his brother who——. Is the other one here, by-the-bye?"

"Not yet—but he may be, any moment. There is no mistake, I can assure you. This way, please!"

Without ceremony he took the banker by the arm, in order, in the semi-darkened room, to guide him to the bed.

A little old man with lanky grey hair, who had been sitting beside it, rose from his chair, to step discreetly into the background.

"Here is Mr. Gairdner," said the doctor, bending over the injured man. "I will leave you alone with him; but first drink this."

He pressed a glass to the moribund lips, then, having motioned Mr. Gairdner to the vacant chair, turned to go.

He had not reached the door when Max's thin voice—so strangely pared of all its body—arrested him.

"Stay here, Dr. Mascott! I would rather you heard. I want another witness—besides Father White. Is Father White here? I can't see."

"I am here, my child," said the little old man with the lanky hair, surging up at the foot of the bed.

"That's right! Stand where I can see you. It will help me. And Dr. Mascott is here too?"

"Yes," said the doctor, half reluctantly taking up his stand beside the priest. After which the young man upon the bed and the old man at the foot of it, smiled for a moment at each other, quite happily, and as though with some secret understanding.

Letting himself down heavily onto the chair beside him, Mr. Gairdner looked with alarmed and expectant eyes towards the man who had sent for him. He had seen Max more than once at the Bank, and remembered him as radiantly handsome; but the discoloured face upon the pillow brought no sense of recognition.

"Mr. Gairdner," Max said slowly, after a moment's pause, spent in mustering his strength, "what did my brother say to you when you got that letter from Herr Bäumel—the one about the overcoat, I mean?"

Mr. Gairdner, too much staggered to find his tongue at once, stared hard, in silence.

"Please speak!" said Max, with a touch of irritation in his faint, hoarse voice. "Doctor Mascott says that there is not much time to lose. What did he say?"

"He said that the story was true," answered the banker, pulling himself together.

"You mean the story of his having been four weeks in prison for the theft of that overcoat?"

"Yes."

"And so it was true—that part of it—but not the other. It was he who went to prison, but it was I who stole the overcoat."

He said it with so complete an absence of emotion, so quietly and almost so casually, that Mr. Gairdner

had to think over the words before quite grasping their import. Having done so he looked at the doctor with a distinct question in his eyes. But the doctor looked only at the patient's face, calculating the probable duration of his strength. The confession itself did not interest him particularly, only the call it was likely to make upon the small store of vital energy.

"No, my mind is not wandering," said Max rightly interpreting that questioning look. "My head is clearer than it has ever been in all my life—so clear that I see myself at last for what I am (it is Father White who has shown me that) and Viktor for what he is. And I want you to see him too. The matter is quite simple, really. We were very poor and I was very cold—for it was winter; and I took the coat out of a coffee-house—it was the fur lining that did the mischief—was too much for my virtue. To Viktor I made up a story of its being a present, and he believed me. Then I fell ill—in spite of the coat—and he tried to pawn it, and it was recognised. When the policeman came to arrest him, I was in bed, and he insisted on going to prison in my place; and I, being a coward, let him go. When we came to England we thought we had left the past behind us, but it seems we hadn't; and I—being still a coward—allowed the farce to go on. But to-day it ends. That is the whole story, Mr. Gairdner. Do you believe it?"

The faint voice was wonderfully even, never raised by a tone, as though intent on husbanding its resources.

"Do you believe it, Mr. Gairdner?" he asked again, being met with silence.

"Yes, I believe it," said Mr. Gairdner, awaking as though from sleep, and speaking in a voice far unsteadier than that of the dying man.

Then after a moment:

"And I honour you for not remaining a coward to the last."

Max's wan smile was touched with a wisdom unattainable to Mr. Gairdner—to any man with a hold on life.

"If you knew how easy it is—now!" Then his eyes turned to the priest, with, in them, an unspoken question, and the priest nodded approvingly in return.

Then Max looked at the doctor.

"Will my brother soon be here? I should like to see him now."

"He must be here directly. My first message can't have found him at home. But your wife is waiting in the next room, Mr. Vogler. We can let her in now, can we not?"

"Clare," said Max, musingly, and without any trace of his former excitement. "Not quite yet, I think. I would rather see her quite at the end. In this I am a coward still."

Doctor Mascott was at his side already, glass in hand—warned by the sudden collapse in his voice.

"Viktor!" said the shaky whisper, almost in the doctor's ear. "Why does not Viktor come?"

The fact that, from the moment that he knew himself to be dying, his wife seemed to have retreated into the background of his mind and his brother to have usurped the first place, was one of those symptoms which eluded Doctor Mascott's diagnosis.

He was still puzzling over it when he heard the door behind him open, and saw the dregs of life stirring once more in the eyes before him.

"Viktor! It is done!" cried Max, in a voice whose joyful shrillness seemed as though it must resist the wreck of the body.

It was no more than a body already when Viktor, stumbling against the furniture in the darkened room, arrived to fling himself upon his knees beside the bed upon which lay the brother whose burden he had promised to bear.

* * * * *

"You bore that burden, indeed," the little lanky-haired old man was presently saying to the desolate mourner, while laying a withered hand upon the shoulder convulsed with sobs, "but in doing so you gave him another to bear—one that was beyond his strength. What you weep as a misfortune is, in reality, his greatest good fortune. He has died at peace, but he never could have lived at peace;—for can anything good come of a lie?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WIDOW.

RELUCTANTLY Viktor followed the pompous butler across the lobby in Grosvenor Place. It was no inclination which dictated this visit, but a peremptory summons from Clare—the widow of three months' standing, and whom he had not seen since the day of Max's funeral. During most of these three months she had been prostrated, not so much by the after-effects of the accident, as by those of another sort of shock endured on the top of it. The causes which had confined her to her parents' house—in which she had taken refuge—were more of a moral than a physical nature. So, at least, judged Doctor Mascott.

More than once Viktor—as in duty bound—had sought news of his sister-in-law, only to hear that she was utterly unable to see anybody.

But to-day the summons had come.

In the black-robed figure which rose at his entrance it was hard to recognise the "Snow Queen" of his fancy. Of all that whiteness which had dazzled him, there remained only that of the widow's cap, like a shrunken remnant of last winter's snow. Her face, too, was changed—not less beautiful, but sharper in outline

than he remembered it, and with a new line about the mouth.

It was in silence that he took the hand held towards him; then, being seated, cleared his throat for a commonplace remark.

"I am glad to see you looking yourself—or nearly so. It was kind of you to let me come and see you."

"It isn't a question of kindness," said Clare, very low and distinctly, "but only of common justice. I have never spoken to you yet since—that dreadful day."

"A dreadful day, indeed! That summons to Ealing and what I found there are things which I cannot yet understand that I survived."

"Neither can I. I lost more than Max on that day. I lost my belief in him."

Viktor hung his head a little. In the presence of Max's widow the consciousness of his own innocence weighed heavier than guilt.

"I am sorry," he stammered awkwardly. "It would have been better if he had not spoken!"

"Better! Don't talk so wildly. The truth has to be spoken—at all costs. A lie is too ugly a thing to die in. I am glad he did not die in it—for the sake of what I once felt for him."

Viktor looked up, startled.

"Of what you once felt, Clare? You can't pretend, surely, that you have ceased to feel?"

"That is not the right expression. It was the other Max Vogler, the honest man and honourable gentleman whom I loved; for Max Vogler the thief, the hypocrite, I never felt anything; so how can I be said to cease?"

Viktor looked at her aghast, feeling as though each tone of her polished voice were cutting through him, like the finest tempered steel.

"But have you no pity in your soul?" he burst out, after one moment of awed silence. "Can you make no allowances for human weakness? After all, he loved you, and he was your husband."

"He had no right to be so. He let me marry him on false pretences. And as for pity? Oh, yes, I can pity such weaklings; but you must not ask me not to despise them."

Suddenly she bent towards him.

"Do you know what the most bitter thought of my life is now? The thought that my child will be his child—the child of a convicted thief! Ah—why did that tree not prove my death as well as his!"

The cry came in a voice which shook, not with sorrow, but with rage.

Viktor rose abruptly.

"Clare, I am going. This is too painful. I was not prepared for it."

She made a movement as though to retain him.

"Not yet! You must not go yet; I have not said anything that I meant to say. When I sent for you it was to tell you how deeply I regret my past coldness to you. Is there anything I can do in compensation?"

"Nothing, except to respect Max's memory, if only because he spoke the truth at the end."

"Ah, you are generous! I used to think that the generosity was Max's, but now I know better. It is only now that I begin to understand you, Viktor, and to be glad of having so noble a brother."

As she looked up at him towering frowningly above her Clare felt a recurrence of an impression she had once had before—the recognition that when his eyes blazed Viktor became a distinctly imposing personage. At the same time she remembered that this man was supposed to be in love with her—at any rate, to have been in love with her. Was he so still? It might be interesting to find out.

And, meanwhile, Viktor, too, was being visited by reminiscences—in especial that of that wild temptation of putting Max out of the running, in order to gain this woman for himself. Well, Max was out of the running now—in more senses than one, and something in the light in the upturned eyes told him that his chances need not be desperate. But nothing like desire stirred within him—rather a sort of alarmed repulsion. Whereas to think of her as only a sister had once been pain, it was not even as a sister that he coveted her now.

The briefness of his leave-taking told Clare all that she had wanted to find out.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "BROWNING."

An hour later Viktor was rather astonished to find himself disembarking on the Wimbledon platform. What exact train—either of the time-table or of thought—had brought him there he could not have said. Maybe the stern rigidity of principle against which he had just bruised himself as against an iceberg had aroused the yearning for something softer, something warmer and more human. And he knew where that was to be found. Mr. Gairdner he now saw daily, since on the morrow of Max's funeral he had been, with a certain *éclat,* reinstated in his old position at the Bank, voluntarily vacated by Mr. McFirkins; but Nella he had not seen since the day on which, with burning cheeks, she had slipped from his attic. The first heavy pall of mourning had smothered even the thought of her; but to-day the pall was lifting—steadily, irresistibly, just as Mr. Gairdner had known that it would lift, and therefore waited patiently, and just as Beesly, too, had known that it would lift, and likewise waited—in an agony.

Blind and deaf to everything that did not bear directly upon his purpose, Viktor actually ran against a lean and dingy little man on the Wimbledon platform

without in the least recognising his quondam fellow clerk, who, under the altered circumstances, had felt himself morally compelled to quit Mr. Gairdner's service. From the moment that Viktor's star had resumed its ascendant course, that of Beesly had necessarily declined—so low, indeed, that suspicion concerning the anonymous letter had actually fastened upon him. After that he had felt that there was no choice but to go. This, naturally, evolved his exclusion from the tennis-parties at Magnolia Villa, reducing him to those same surreptitious glimpses of Nella which had once been all that Viktor could hope for. But the reason of his haunting both the Wimbledon platform and the neighbourhood lay not alone in the hope of these glimpses; it lay almost as much in his painful curiosity concerning Viktor's movements. That Viktor would end by claiming the prize which lay within his grasp he could not reasonably doubt, the less so as he was well aware of the complete standstill of his relations with his bereaved sister-in-law. Whatever hopes Beesly may have built upon Clare's beauty were dead now. She no longer formed an obstacle between Viktor and Nella.

To hang about waiting for the accomplishment of that which he dreaded was too exquisite a torture to be foregone. He did so with a revolver in his pocket. What he would do with the revolver when the moment came, he did not quite know, but its mere possession gave him a welcome feeling of superiority—the proud consciousness of being able to command events.

The moment had been long in coming, but to-day it had evidently come.

After the collision with Viktor, Beesly stepped back

hastily into the shadow; then, with collar turned up to ears, followed his rival from afar, caressing the bulge in his right-hand pocket the while. The shades of the winter evening were falling fast, and the road from the station to Magnolia Villa at moments almost deserted. If Viktor went into that villa, he would come out of it betrothed to Nella Gairdner—that much was certain. But need he go in? One pull of the trigger would settle that matter. The very desertion of the road seemed to be screaming into Beesly's ear that it depended entirely upon himself to prevent that betrothal preparing. Once or twice he looked behind him, once or twice took the revolver out of his pocket, but always put it back again. For several minutes after Viktor had disappeared into the house Beesly stood staring hard at the lighted windows.

"Coward! Coward!" he was saying to himself under his breath. "What have I to lose, after all?"

Suddenly he set off running, round the next block of houses, and through a narrow outlet, into the lane at the back. Since he had not had the courage to kill Viktor, nothing remained to him but to kill himself, and the lane struck him as a more suitable spot for his purpose than the road, because of its greater privacy. Here, in sight of the windows of Nella's own room—which he knew to overlook it—he would put an end to his miserable life, and thus mar the joy of that betrothal which was his destruction. Here the shot could not fail to be heard, he would be found by the servants, seen by her—his cruel love—and in her memory his dead face would live as a standing reproach to her happiness.

Breathless, he leaned against the wall, across which at this season no balls ever flew. Next summer they would fly again, but he would not be there to pick them up—would not even be able to lean here and listen for the sound of her voice within the garden. While gay people ran across the lawn in the sunshine, where would he be exactly? In which churchyard?

With a shaking hand he took out his handkerchief, to wipe his clammy forehead. Would they bury him here, straight off, at Wimbledon? or would they send him back to London? What could it matter, since the earth would be as cold here as there! Brr! No wonder his teeth chattered at the very thought. And to be forgotten so soon! Even great men were forgotten, so what could such a small man as he expect? Perhaps, after all, it was not worth while, perhaps a living reproach might effect more than a dead one. But would they care—in the midst of their happiness? No, no, the blood-stained face, only the blood-stained face would do it. If only the earth were not so cold! It must be easier to die in summer. But he could not wait till then.

Where was it that people shot themselves? Ah, yes, the temples. But how high up that was. His hand could not lift so far, not this heavy thing, at any rate. And how stiff the trigger was! It would not move under his finger. Perhaps that of Providence was upon it; perhaps he was not meant to die. It was wrong to fly in the face of Providence. Better throw it away before——

Ah—what was that?

"So I *am* meant to die, after all!"

It was Beesly's last conscious thought, as with ears filled with a sudden detonation, he fell heavily to the ground.

* * * * *

Viktor, having made his way into the house, found Miss Jerrum in sole possession of the drawing-room, and just about to withdraw from a devastated tea-table.

At sight of the visitor the round face under the lace cap grew rounder yet with the breadth of the smile displayed.

"She is in the kitchen," said Pussy, without waiting for any explanations; "some new recipe or other. Shall I fetch her?"

"Please do. But, wait a moment, Miss Jerrum! Perhaps it might be as well not to tell her who is here," added Viktor, with a sudden remorseful recollection of Nella's retreat from his attic, and an equally sudden realisation of the bitterness which must, ever since, have been seething in her heart. "Our last meeting was a little unconventional, and I'm afraid she has been rather angry with me."

"I know she has," said Miss Jerrum, smoothing the grey bands of hair which framed her face, with as judicial an air as she could achieve. "But"—and the judicial air broke down lamentably—"I don't think she will go on being angry."

"Not if I can get speech of her, perhaps. So please help me to do so by not mentioning my name."

Viktor's surmises regarding the obstacles to be overcome proved correct. When, lured away presently by some shameless fable of Pussy's from the concoction of a new sweetmeat, and with a white apron covering her

frock and a wooden ladle in her hand, Nella looked in impatiently, nothing but his close vicinity to the door prevented her immediate escape—whether on account of the apron or of the bitterness aforementioned, it was not easy to decide. As it was, Viktor was too close and too determined—especially as a wooden ladle is no adequate weapon of defence.

* * * * *

"It's German toffy I was making," explained Nella, some ten minutes later. To which Viktor, wiping his slightly sticky moustache, replied:

"So I had surmised—by the consistency."

"You forgot, I suppose, that I still had your mother's cookery-book. I may as well tell you that I had really meant to steal it. And, by-the-bye, talking of stealing. I simply don't care two buttons whether you took that overcoat or not. I only care for your being—*you.*"

If laxity of principles was what Viktor required, he certainly seemed to have found what he wanted.

"Thank you, little Gerda," he murmured. "No, to be sure, that's not your right name. I was forgetting."

"What is that?" said Nella a moment later, raising her head sharply from a quite unusual resting place.

"It sounded like a shot."

"And it sounded as though it came from the lane. Surely it is too early for burglars?"

"Not for up-to-date burglars. The newest species rather favour daylight, you know—so long as there is a motor handy. Shall I go and see?"

"With burglars about, and firearms? No, I can't let

you go," said Nella, taking a firm hold of the lapel of his coat, "or else I shall go with you."

"No, you will not, little Gerda; you will wait here, if I ask you; and neither will you prevent me doing what, clearly, I ought to do, seeing that Mr. Gairdner is not home yet. Have not you yourself just given me the right to replace him? Let me go, Nella, and, for goodness' sake, don't look tragical! Most likely it was an air-pistol."

He kissed the fingers which he had detached from his coat, and, with a reassuring laugh, across his shoulder, made for the door.

When he returned some ten minutes later, he was not laughing any more.

"Well?" asked Nella, precipitately, alarmed by the disturbance upon his face. "Is it burglars?"

"No, it isn't. It is—in fact it is Beesly."

"Mr. Beesly?"

Nella sprang forward, struck by a new terror.

"That shot was Mr. Beesly's? He—he is dead?"

"No, I don't think so; but the shot was fired by him —undoubtedly. We found him in the lane—insensible —the revolver still in his hand. They are bringing him into the house."

"In here—they are to bring him in here!" said Nella peremptorily. "Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Jane has gone for one. He will find the wound, no doubt. We haven't found any, and yet he is lying like a log."

Before many minutes were passed Beesly's spare form lay bedded on the drawing-room sofa, his arms hanging inert by his sides, and with embroidered

cushions thrust under his limp head, their brilliant colours showing up the ghastly pallor of the face with the immovably closed eyes.

On her knees beside the sofa, about which she busied herself, Nella looked up at Viktor, her own eyes swimming in tears.

"I can guess why he did that."

"So can I," said Viktor, reluctantly and almost remorsefully.

"We must not let him die, Viktor! we must not! Oh, I wish the doctor would come!"

The doctor was not yet come when presently Beesly's eyelids were quiveringly raised, and he found himself looking into Nella's deeply concerned face, bent over him, Viktor having retired discreetly into the background.

"Am I alive?" he asked thickly, "or is this heaven?"

"No—it is not heaven, Mr. Beesly; it is our Wimbledon drawing-room; and you—had an accident with a revolver. But, thank heaven, it doesn't seem to have been very bad."

"A revolver? Yes—I remember now. The trigger was stiff, and I wanted to throw it away, and then——"

A sheet-lightning of terror shot through his eyes.

"Are you sure I am alive? Are you sure I am not going to die?"

"No, no, you are not going to die. The doctor will tell you so when he comes."

"When is he coming?"

"Immediately—any moment. You will be quite well again, Mr. Beesly."

"And I shall be able to walk about in the sunshine? They won't take me to the churchyard?"

"What an idea, Mr. Beesly! It is the tennis-ground that is waiting for you, not the churchyard."

"Ah, yes—tennis! unless I have injured some muscles—that might interfere. I wonder where I hit myself?" And with his still limp hands he felt himself cautiously all over. "Any blood to be seen?"

"None that we can discover. But don't tire yourself. The doctor will be here directly."

He came almost as she spoke.

With fast-beating heart Nella, in an adjoining room, awaited the result of the examination. The smile on the face of the doctor, as presently he entered, was distinctly reassuring, even though a trifle ironical.

"Will he live?" she asked tremulously.

"To a hundred, if it depends upon himself!"

"Where is he hurt?"

"There is no hurt done except to self-confidence. Not so much as a scratch upon him. A case of dead fright. Another of the large class of people whose thoughts are greater than their deeds. I won't pretend to say what his original intention was, but it's clear to me that, in the end, that little 'Browning' took matters into its own hands. My patient is almost out of his mind with joy at finding that he has not effected what I suppose he took to be his purpose."

"Then he won't do it again?"

The doctor laughed confidently.

"No fear! Safest man of my acquaintance to trust with firearms. He'll have a holy horror of them, for all time—depend upon it! I'm going now; not wanted

here a bit. Shall just scribble down a prescription for some nerve soothing stuff. You might give it him before sending him back to town. And if, by the same opportunity, you saw your way to administering a bit of a moral sedative, it would be all the better—don't you know."

The doctor, being a family doctor, and therefore not quite ignorant of the lie of the land, looked at Nella rather hard as he said it.

"You'll find it easier to administer than you imagine. A fright of this sort generally has a most salutary—I might say, sobering effect."

A little later Nella, with all these things on her mind, was administering the moral sedative. As the doctor had foretold, the task was not so hard as she had feared. Even passion seemed to have paled under the shadow of the wing of death. This chastened frame of mind made it possible to use even a little severity.

"I know quite well why you wanted to do it," said Nella, admonishingly, "but it would have been a shabby thing to do; and I can only forgive you if you promise to make the best of your life."

"I suppose I shall have to," said Beesly resignedly. "Since I have not had the courage to kill either Vogler or myself, what remains to me but to live on, as best I can?"

"That's right! And I shall help you—and so will Viktor. Yes—yes, you will have to get used to hearing me calling him Viktor."

"You will let me see you sometimes—even if only from a distance? You will let me hear your voice—from over the wall?"

"Not only from over the wall. You can come inside our walls, if you like, and can sit at our hearth. After all, if you really cared for me, you would be glad that I am happy; and I am so happy that I want to see everybody else happy, too. Will you promise not to be unhappy any more, Mr. Beesly—for my sake?"

"I will try," said the stepchild of life.

"Poor devil!" was Viktor's comment, on hearing Nella's report, given between laughter and tears.

THE END.

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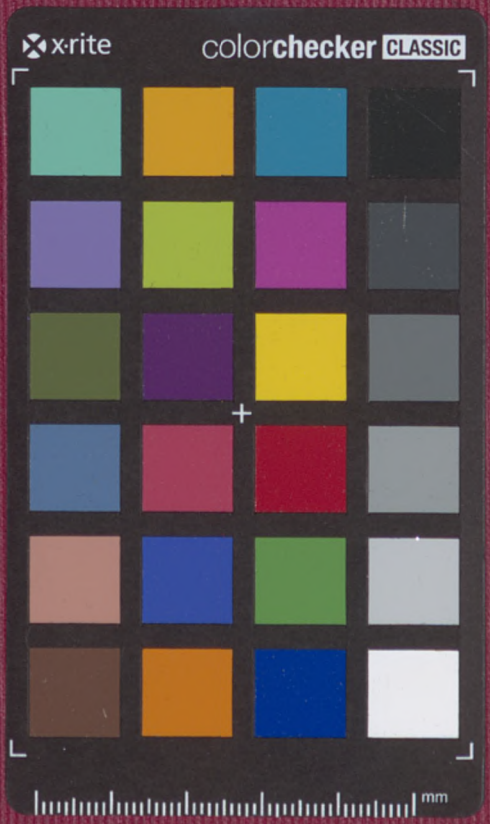
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