TWO BAD BLUE EYES

"RITA"

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" ' My dear,' says Lady Etwynde to Lauraine, as she sits in the boudoir of the latter, ' your roses looked charming.' "
(Chapter IX.)

TWO BAD BLUE EYES

By

"RITA"

Author of "Joan and Mrs. Carr," "Darby and Joan," "Vivienne," etc.

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
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CHAPTER I

IT is Lauraine Douglas' wedding-day.

A delicious gleam of sunshine streams through the curtained windows—flickers over the dainty arrangements of the toilet-table, loses itself in the white wonders of lace, linen, and embroidery strewed about in different directions, and finally wanders to a dusky head on the pillows, and plays at hide and seek over the closed eyelids of a very lovely face.

The eyelids open—quite suddenly, quite wakefully—not with any half-and-half preparation—any symptom of sleepiness.

The inquisitive sunbeam has done its work, and retreats bashfully now as two white arms are thrown suddenly up and placed beneath the girl's head, and resting thus she takes a survey of the mysterious garments, the pretty room, the aspect of the weather, as promised by the wealth of prodigal sunlight, and, finally, the clock on the opposite chimney-piece.

"My wedding-day!"—so run her thoughts.

"Only a few hours more and I am Lauraine Douglas no longer! Only a few hours and the old life and the things of it are done and past for ever—for ever. How strange it seems to think of that now! . . . My wedding-day! . . . How different I thought it would be once. How different I thought I should feel. Oh, Keith! Keith! what an old, far-away dream that looks. I suppose you have long ago forgotten it. And yet how we loved each other . . . you and I! A boy-and-girl fancy, my mother calls it. Well, perhaps, it was; it is long enough since I heard from him, and I suppose he has long forgotten me. I wonder if he has

made the fortune he spoke of yet? But what on earth makes me think of these things to-day, of all days? . . . And so it really is my wedding-day at last! I wonder how most girls feel on their wedding-day! I can't say I feel in any way different—no stir, or flutter, or anticipation of any description. I am glad it is going to be fine, and how nice to be able to wear *real* orange blossoms! Sir Francis was very good to send them. I wonder if I shall ever think of him and call him anything but *Sir* Francis. Somehow I never can. I wish he was not so old—old, at least, for me, and I wish he did not love me in quite such a fierce, wild fashion. I seem to have been quite swept off my feet by the current of his passion and my mother's persuasions. . . . After all, I suppose one must be married some time or other . . . only—only——"

She breaks off with a sudden sigh, and sits up in the bed, pushing off the thick, dusky hair from her brows with an impatient gesture.

"It is no use deceiving myself. I am going to be married and I *hate* the thought, and how I have been dragged into it I scarcely know. Sometimes I think I should never have yielded. . . . How oddly one drifts into things! . . . And Sir Francis is so infatuated, and it seemed no use saying 'No.' I wish he were not so jealous. I can't understand the feeling myself. I wonder what it's like? Not pleasant by any means, if I am to judge by my future lord and master. Will he be my master, I wonder? How I should hate to be ordered about, and kept in check, and ruled! Mamma is bad enough, in all conscience; but, still, I have managed to get my own way with her, pretty often. How she has badgered me about this marriage, and what a desperate hurry they have been in to get it off! Heigho! only a month since I bartered my liberty for—for—ahem!—shall I go over all 'the good gifts that crown me queen' of this much-sought-after baronet? Unencumbered estates, magnificent income, ancient family—pooh!

how sickening it is! After all, what do I care for these things? One comfort is, I go to him heart-whole. No sentiments in the background, no lovers to moan and fret over. I wonder if I am really cold-hearted, or if I never shall fall in love? Gracious! what am I saying? That folly must be over after 11.30 to-day. I suppose the nearest approach to it was that boy-and-girl romance with Keith. Poor old Keith! What a nice boy he was, and what a dare-devil, impetuous, headstrong sort of fellow! No milk-and-water lover he—a regular torrent of impetuosity, bearing one along, whether one would or no. I suppose he has forgotten me though, and no wonder. How rude mamma was to him, and how delighted when he turned his back on the Old World and went off to the New! I suppose if I ever see him again he will be a regular Yankee, and talk like that dreadful woman, Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe, as she calls herself. And she will be at the breakfast, after all! Mamma *would* ask her. Heavens! how she does worship money! But I suppose that comes of having had so little all her life."

A little sleepy yawn comes in here, then the pretty head turns away from the sunlight, and nestles itself among the pillows again. But it is no use to woo sleep any longer. The eyes remain open, and the brain is busy with thoughts, until at eight o'clock a knock at the door is followed by the entrance of a maid, with hot water and letters. The girl sits up and stretches out her hands for the latter—just two. She holds them a moment, and looks hesitatingly at the superscription.

"The last time I shall see that name," she murmurs, half aloud, as she reads the "Miss Douglas" that has been her nomenclature for twenty years of her life. "Heigho! it makes me sad to think of it, after all. . . . Yes, Jane, draw up the blind. A fine morning? Well, of course, I can see that. No, I don't want anything more. You can go till I ring."

Left alone, she opens the letters. The first is appar-

ently of little interest, and is tossed carelessly aside. The second—at the first line she starts and flushes as red as a June rose ; then with eager eyes reads on with devouring speed till the end. It is not a very long letter, but it seems to agitate her in no small degree.

" How strange ! " she says. " After all these years—and to-day, of all days ! What on earth am I to do ? "

She grows very white, and for some moments leans back on the snowy pillows, with her breath coming fitfully and unevenly, and her eyes looking sad and troubled. Then with a great effort she rises and puts the letter aside, and proceeds with her morning toilette.

She is standing before the mirror in a loose white dressing-gown, her long rich hair hanging loosely about her, when the door opens and a lady enters.

A very handsome, stately lady, with sufficient likeness to the girl to suggest their relationship ; but the soft curved lips of the young face are thin and cold in the older one, and the eyes, though brilliant, still lack the softness and tenderness that give so great a charm to those of Lauraine.

" Up and dressed, my darling ! " she says, in clear, sweet tones. Then she comes near to the girl and kisses her effusively on both cheeks. " Will you come to my boudoir for breakfast ? " she continues. " I made Henriette dress my hair first, so that you can have all her attention afterwards. What a barbarous custom to have weddings so early in the day ! You look very well, dear ; just a trifle pale, but that is quite correct for a bride." Then she kisses her again, and Lauraine submits to the caresses with a sort of passive contempt. There is no gladness on her face, nor in her eyes, and she has certainly grown very pale, but the pallor only makes the beautiful eyes more wistful, and the sweet red lips more exquisite in contrast.

The girl is tall and slender, with delicately-cut features, and a wealth of dusky gold-brown hair, and a clear, creamy skin, that shows every trace of the coursing

blood as it flows beneath. It warms suddenly now, with a brilliant flush, as she meets her mother's eyes and listens to her words. The white slender hand moves to the toilet-table, and takes from amidst its glittering array a letter lying there.

"Mother," she says suddenly, "whom do you think I have heard from this morning? An old friend of ours."

Mrs. Douglas looks a little startled just for a moment. Then she smiles sweetly.

"I am a bad hand at guessing, love. Pray tell me, if it is of any importance."

Lauraine looks full at her, still holding the letter in her hand. "It is from—Keith," she says calmly.

"From Mr. Athelstone!" remarks Mrs. Douglas calmly, but a little nervous agitation is visible on her face. "Dear me! I thought he had long forgotten us!"

"So did I," answers Lauraine, glancing for an instant at the superscription.

"But he has not. You never told me that he had written to you, mamma, three months ago."

"To me! Did he really?" and Mrs. Douglas colours ever so little. "I forgot all about it. Yes, now you mention it, he did write me—some nonsense about his prospects, and how they were improving. Nothing to interest me, or you either. I think you were away."

"I was not away at the time," says Lauraine quietly; "and any news from Keith would have interested me. But I suppose you thought it best to—forget."

Mrs. Douglas looks slightly uncomfortable. "Dear me, Lauraine," she says pettishly, "what are you making such a fuss for? Keith was a very nice boy, and all that; but you are both grown up now, and that brother-and-sister business couldn't go on for ever. What does he say in that letter? Is he still in Chicago?"

"He is in England," answers Lauraine, still very quietly; "and he has been left an immense fortune by some rich, eccentric old Yankee, who took a great fancy to him. Also, he is coming here this morning to call

on us. He is anxious to see me after four years' absence."

Mrs. Douglas turns suddenly very white. Her eyes flash their eager scrutiny at her daughter's face.

"What nonsense! Here—and to-day? It is impossible. I must send a message."

"Stay, mother." The girl lays her hand on her mother's arm, and her voice trembles a little. "Don't send any message. Let him come. He will be here just when we come back from the church.

"I should like to see my old playmate, and receive his congratulations on such a day as this. We were always like brother and sister, you know. He will be delighted with my future prospects, I am sure—though I feel rather like the servants who leave an old place 'to better themselves,' and are not quite sure how they will get on in the new. Oh, do let him come! It is just the one thing wanting to make my wedding perfect."

Mrs. Douglas looks at her with puzzled wonder. "I don't quite understand you," she says uncomfortably. "You really wish Keith Athelstone to come here, knowing nothing of the altered circumstances? It will be horribly unpleasant. There will be a scene, and you know I detest scenes. They are such bad form."

"There will be no scene," Lauraine says very quietly. "I think you know me better than that. And it is the last thing I ask of you, before I leave your house to-day. Let him come."

She speaks calmly enough, but a feverish flush glows in her cheek, and her eyes look up at her mother's face more in command than in entreaty.

"Oh! if you put it like that," Mrs. Douglas says, with a pretty pretence of feeling that Lauraine regards with scornful amusement, "I cannot deny you. Let it be so, then. I only hope he will behave himself. He was always so dreadfully impetuous and hot-headed. That Spanish mother of his is to blame for that. Well, my darling, it is a charming day for your wedding, and if you are ready for breakfast come down to my boudoir.

You will find me there. By the way, would you mind giving me that letter to read? I should like to see what he says."

Lauraine hands it to her, and an odd little smile comes over her lips.

"If we had not been *quite* so much like brother and sister," she says, "and if you hadn't been quite so determined to marry me this season, Keith would have been a pretty good match after all."

Mrs. Douglas gives her a sharp glance of scrutiny. "You are not foolish enough to regret this boy," she says. "He could never be such a match as Sir Francis."

"Regret! Why should I regret?" says the girl, turning away with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "Regret and I parted company long ago."

And Mrs. Douglas leaves the room comforted, even if a little puzzled by her daughter's odd conduct.

"Lauraine was always extraordinary," she says, seating herself in her boudoir to commence the perusal of this unwelcome letter. "How thankful I am that I have secured so excellent a future for her! I really thought at one time I could do nothing with her. She is so very odd in some things. However, Sir Francis will have to manage her now; she's off my hands, thank goodness! It is a pity he is such a brute; but then he is such a good match, and I am so fearfully in debt. How on earth I am to pay for the trousseau I don't know; and nowadays it's not every man who will take a girl without a penny."

Then she gives a sigh of relief, and takes her chocolate from Henriette, and settles herself comfortably in her chair to the perusal of this inopportune letter. As she reads it her brow clouds. She throws it down at last with an angry exclamation. "How horribly unfortunate it should have come to-day! Still, it's a mercy it did not come sooner. What a worry this boy has always been to me! First left to my husband's guardianship, and by his death to mine; then all that nonsense with

Lauraine years ago, and the trouble I had to stop it; and now he turns up rich and independent, and, I suppose, in love still, though he doesn't say that. What on earth will he say about my keeping back that letter three months ago? But it was such nonsense, and it would have spoiled my scheme entirely. I hope to goodness Lauraine has forgotten him; she seemed to take it very quietly. Only when they meet it will really be very awkward. Dear me! I shall need all my self-possession to prevent an *esclandre*. I must try and see him first and alone. I suppose he has learnt to control himself a little by this time. Poor boy! after all he was very nice; and what a handsome face—and those eyes! They would coax anything out of one, really. 'Bad blue eyes,' his old nurse used to call them. Poor old thing! she will go out of her mind with delight at the bare thought of seeing him again. I had better send Lauraine to tell her. Ah! here she comes."

Lauraine enters, paler than ever, and her mother glances somewhat anxiously at the pretty, daintily-spread breakfast-table. Certainly the poverty Mrs. Douglas speaks of is not outwardly visible in any of the appointments or surroundings of the house in Grosvenor Street. Poverty, according to the ideas of fashionable ladies, seems an extraordinary compound of selfish desires and inability to be wildly extravagant.

"Here is your letter, dear," she says to Lauraine. "Really quite a stroke of luck for poor Keith; I am more than delighted about it. Perhaps, after all, it *is* as well he should come here at once, so after breakfast just run upstairs and tell old nurse. She will be overjoyed at the good news. And now you really must eat something. You look very pale, and I want you to be spoken of as the prettiest bride of the season."

Lauraine's lips curl scornfully, but she says nothing, only in her heart she thinks, "I hope few brides feel as I do to-day!"

CHAPTER II

"HEAVEN bless you, my bonnie bird," says a trembling voice.

It is an hour and a half later, and Lauraine, in her shimmering satin robe, and with her bridal wreath upon her brow, stands before a bent, aged figure, supporting itself on a crutch, looking with dim and most loving eyes at the beautiful vision.

"Ah," goes on the quavering old voice, "may long life and happiness be aye yours, my dearie. It's auld Nannie will pray for it every day she lives, though she never thoct to see you mated wi' sic a bridegroom, nor wearing a face so sad on your ain wedding morn. Ah! if Maister Keith were here the day he'd be carrying a sair heart in his breast, I'm thinking."

"Hush, nurse!" said the girl gently. "I can't stay a minute. I've only come to tell you some news. Master Keith *is* coming here—coming to-day; and if he calls when we are at—at church, I want you to see him, and—and tell him about this. Will you, nursie? And make it as pleasant as you can. Tell him that I am very happy . . . Oh, nurse!—nurse!"

The brave clear voice gives way, a sob bursts from the girl, and, regardless of the beautiful dress, the costly lace, she throws herself at the old woman's feet, and burying her face in her lap, bursts into tears.

"Whist, whist, my lamb!" cries the old woman, terrified at such unexpected emotion. "What for are ye taking on in sic a way? There, dry your eyes, my bonnie bairn. You needn't greet on your wedding-day, surely; and, oh! if your leddy mither comes and sees that braw goon all sae crushed and crookit, what will she be saying? There, there—rest ye quiet now. What is it ye're greeting for? Ye tell't me but yester e'en ye were aye quite content wi' yersel'."

"Ah!" says the girl, rising to her feet, and dashing the tears away with a half-ashamed energy,

" perhaps I did ; but then, nursie, that was yesterday."

" Ye were always a queer bit bairn," says the old woman, looking proudly and fondly at her beautiful charge. " Heaven make yer life gang straight, my dearie. My heart misgies me sore for you the day, though I oughtn't to speak sae despondingly. Still I will e'en hope for the best, and pray for ye while there's aye a breath left in my auld body to do it."

" Aye, do," answers the girl softly, as she presses her fresh young lips to the withered cheek. " Who knows, nurse, I may need your prayers yet ? "

" Dinna ye speak sae sadly, my bairn," says the old woman. " Keep up a brave heart, and aye trust in Providence. You're a braw bride, my dearie, and maybe he'll be a gude mon to ye, for didn't he swear to worship the verra ground ye walk on ? "

" Don't let us talk of him," answers the girl pettishly. " I feel quite wicked, nurse, when I think of what I am doing. It seems to come home to me so terribly now. But it's too late to help anything—too late ! "

" Dinna say those words ; they have a wearyful sound on your bonnie lips," says the aged woman tenderly. " Maybe, it will turn out better than ye think ; and the mistress's heart was just set upon it, you know, and she was always a masterful woman in her way. Ay—ay, my bairn, it's ill to greet o'er spilt milk, and all the kye in the byrne. There, now, they'll e'en be calling you. Yes, I'll remember about Maister Keith, and he'll hear it as gently as my auld lips can tell him. Ye may trust Nannie for that. Run ye doon now, my dearie, and God bless your bonnie face, and give you a' the happiness He sees fit."

There is a hurried embrace, and then the girl takes up her long, floating train in her left hand, and so goes out of the room and down the stairs, and enters her own chamber once more.

" What a time you have been ! " exclaims her mother impatiently ; " and Henriette is waiting to put on your

veil. Sit down; the carriage will be here directly."

Without a word the girl seats herself before the glass, and the deft fingers of the French maid fastens the filmy lace on the beautiful head, and like a transparent cloud it seems to float over and envelop the lovely figure in its misty folds.

She looks so exquisitely lovely that both mother and maid hold their breath for one moment, and then murmur rhapsodies of admiration. The girl looks quietly at herself, and says nothing. She knows she is beautiful; she has proved it often enough in her three seasons of London life, but to-day she cares very little about that beauty, for her heart is troubled and her peace has fled. If only that letter had not come!

Alas! it is too late now for regrets or repentance. The moments hurry on—hurry on as if they would drag her to her doom with flying wings, not creep along leaden-footed, as her own reluctance would have had them. How is it she feels like this now—now when it is so useless, so vain? A few days—nay, even a few hours ago, and she was content enough; but there seems no content possible now, and the nearer the hour approaches, the greater grows her dread.

"One moment, mother," she says, as Mrs. Douglas turns to leave the room. "Henriette, you may go."

The maid retires, and the girl, her face growing very white, comes close to her mother again, and lays her hand on her arm.

"*Must* I go through with it?" she says almost wildly. "Could I not take back my word—even now?"

"Good heavens! are you mad?" ejaculates Mrs. Douglas. "Go back at the last moment, and the breakfast ready, and the carriages waiting, and every one at the church, and your *trousseau* not even paid for on the strength of the credit of this marriage! My dear Lauraine, you must be a perfect idiot!"

The girl's face grows cold, her hand falls to her side. "I dare say I am," she says bitterly. "I feel it now."

"Your nerves are shaken—you are getting hysterical," exclaims Mrs. Douglas. "Of course it is a very trying time, my dear. You must have some sal volatile before you start. For Heaven's sake don't make a scene in church, or break down, or do anything ridiculous. You always are so odd. Now, any other girl would be thinking how she looked and——"

"What a good price those looks had fetched," interrupts Lauraine sarcastically. "Yes—thank goodness, I have some sense of shame left. I do not feel proud of my position to-day, or my part in this heartless barter."

"Barter! What makes you use such absurd words!" exclaims her mother angrily. "After all I have done for you—after all my sacrifices!"

"Hush!" the girl says wearily, "don't let us discuss that subject now. I think none of your sacrifices would look very great before this of mine, if it came to a question of comparison. But it is no matter. Of course you are right; an *esclandre* now would be too terrible."

She turns coldly away, and takes up the beautiful bouquet that Sir Francis has sent her an hour ago. The smell of the white roses and orange blossoms turns her faint and sick. All her life long, she thinks, that scent will fill her with just such shuddering horror as she feels now. She lets the bouquet fall and clasps her hands despairingly together.

"I did not think it would be so bad as this," she moans. "O God! is there no escape?"

But in the sunny, luxuriantly appointed chamber all is silence. A few minutes after, and down the crimson-carpeted steps a white and radiant figure floats to the waiting carriage.

"How lovely! How young! How beautifully dressed!"

These are the murmurs that fall from an admiring crowd, kept in check by an officious policeman, as they press around the awning that has sheltered the bride's passage. "Lor! if she oughtn't to be happy."

Unconscious of the comments, heedless of the observations, Lauraine is driven off to the fashionable church where her future husband awaits as sad and reluctant a bride as ever the martyrdom of Fashion and the exigencies of Society have sacrificed to the God of Mammon.

The bride's carriage has scarcely disappeared round the corner when a hansom cab dashes up, and is arrested at the awning. A young man jumps out, pays the cabman, and gives a startled glance at the carpeted steps, the gaping crowd, the unwonted stir and bustle around the house. He is not a wedding-guest evidently; there is nothing very festive about his appearance, but for all that he passes up the crimson-carpeted steps and into the hall, and there has an interview with one of the footmen, who, having received instructions on the matter, conducts the visitor into a small room at the back of the house, where sits an old woman with a snowy *mutch* on her head, and a stick in her hand by which she helps herself to rise.

"My lad, my dear young maister!" she cries, and he comes straight up and gives her a hearty kiss and a boisterous hug.

"How are you, Nannie? Why, you look just the same as ever, I do declare! Not a day older. So you see I've come back."

"And a braw welcome to ye, laddie," says the old Scotchwoman, looking up at the tall well-built figure and handsome face, with a world of love and pride and admiration in her dim and loving eyes. "Hech, sir, but it's strong and fine ye look the day, and none the worse for all the foreign countries where ye've stayed sae long. Aye, and it's proud I am to see ye back. Sit ye doon, sir—sit ye doon, and tell me a' the news. My auld heart's been just sair for word o' ye this mony a day."

"I will tell you about myself by-and-by, Nannie," the young fellow says impatiently. "Meanwhile tell me what's going on here. Is it a morning party, or a re-

ception, or some new-fangled social rubbish? Where's Lauraine?"

"Miss Lauraine is awa' at the kirk," says the old woman gently. "Canna ye tell what it's a' aboot, dearie?"

"Church"—falters the young man.

Then the idea flashes across him, his bronzed face falls, an evil light comes into the blue eyes under the shade of their long lashes. "She's not—not married, Nannie?"

The old woman nods her head and lays her hand gently on his arm. "Ay, laddie, wedded this morn. She bade me tell ye, with her love, that she was happy; that she hoped to see ye, her auld friend and playmate—and would ye wait here till her return?"

"Happy is she?" His voice is very cold and stern. His blue eyes flash angrily. Then a short harsh laugh escapes his lips. "Well, I'm glad to hear it, though the news is unexpected. Married—Lorry married! God! What a fool I've been!"

He gets up and walks over to the window and looks out, though nothing does he see of the objects on which he gazes so intently. "Married!" so run his thoughts; "and to-day, too! Couldn't she have waited? Couldn't she have told me? It is three months since I wrote to her mother, and not a line. And I—like an idiot—taking silence for consent, and rushing back here as fast as steam could take me. Married! Good Heaven! I can't believe it. Lorry, my darling little playmate, my sweetheart—the girl who vowed to be true to me for ever—married! Never to be mine—another man's wife! O God! What am I to do?"

He groans aloud at this juncture, and the sympathizing old woman comes to him and her heart aches for her nursling's sorrow. "Dinna take on so," she says; "ye were but bairns togither; ye could na' tell how ye're minds would agree in time to come."

He turns away from the window, and walks to his

seat and flings himself moodily back. It is too early to accept consolation, but he takes refuge in hot anger. He rails against womankind—their wiles and ways, their treachery and fickleness, until poor old Nannie is bewildered. His fury vents itself in this manner for the space of a good half-hour, during which time Nannie listens and agrees and consoles to the best of her ability, but with very poor results.

Then there comes a stir, a bustle—the noise of feet—the sound of voices. Nannie sits up erect and listens.

"They're coming back," she says.

He turns very white again, then looks appealingly at the old woman.

"I can't face them all—it's impossible," he says. "But if I could see her alone—just for five minutes. Oh, Nannie, manage it for me! I know you can."

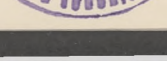
"I'll e'en do my best," she says, rising and hobbling away on her stick, her grey silk gown rustling, her snowy cap, with its lavender ribbons, carried very erect on her white head. "But ye'll nae be cross to the bonnie bairn. I canna have her frightened and disturbed on sic a day. Ye'll mind?"

"Oh yes—yes. I'll mind!" he says impatiently. "Only send her here."

He never knows if the time is long or short that he waits—waits with his heart beating so hard and fast that he can hear it above all those other sounds without. Waits in a sort of sullen desperation, knowing that his pain will be but the fiercer, his anger but the hotter, for the interview he has demanded.

Then there comes a faint rustle of silken skirts, the door opens, there is a sweet subtle perfume of orange-flowers and roses, and before him stands the loveliest vision of womanhood that his eyes have ever rested on.

One moment he looks at her, and all his anger melts away, and an unutterable reproach speaks in his eyes, that are "bad" blue eyes no longer, but only very sad and very haunting.



"Oh, Lauraine!" he says, and his arms go out to clasp her as in the old sweet days that are gone for ever, and sobbing wildly, the girl falls upon his breast.

CHAPTER III

A MOMENT, and she remembers! With flushed cheeks and tear-wet eyes she wrenches herself away, and looks up at the face of her old playmate. "Oh, Keith!" she says, "I—I was so glad to see you!"

The poor pitiful pretence does not blind him. He looks at her sternly. "Indeed? And may I ask for an explanation of your conduct? I think it is due to me. Why have you broken faith?"

She turns deadly pale.

"We were never really engaged," she stammers, "and all those years you never wrote, and I thought——"

"You did *not*!" he says fiercely. "You know me better than that. I am no saint, but I am no mawkish lover either, to fly from one woman's feet to another, and pour out love vows at fancy. You knew I would be true, Lauraine, and you—you have been false."

She trembles, and is silent. He looks at her longingly —thirstily, his eyes taking in all the beauty he so well remembers—all the changes time has wrought. It maddens him to gaze upon her—to think she is so utterly lost to him. He feels there is nothing so cruel, so fierce, he could not say to her at this moment, if only to inflict upon her some of the pain, the agony that throbs in his own heart, and runs riot in his own veins.

"You are like all your sex," he says, in a low deep voice of intense wrath, but a voice that makes her quiver with the mingled rapture, dread, and fear of its memories. "Truth and constancy are unknown to you. Did I need any sign or word to keep *me* true? No. I said I loved you, and would love you to my life's end; and so I shall, God help me! Oh, child! *why* have you done this?"

"I was driven to it," says the girl desperately. "You

cannot understand—you never would, if I spent hours in telling you—how it has all come about. Oh, how I hate myself!—and yet—— Oh, Keith, say you forgive me! Let us part friends. Don't break my heart with your reproaches. In the life before me I shall have misery enough to bear. Give me some kind word now."

"I will not," he says fiercely. "I would not be such a hypocrite. I could almost hate you, only that I know I love you too much for that yet. But I will not be hypocrite enough to say I forgive you, or wish you well, or any such d——d humbug."

"Keith!" bursts from the pale, trembling lips.

"Yes, I mean it," he goes on more wildly, for her beauty maddens him, and he is longing with all the wildest and most passionate longing of his hot-blooded southern nature to fold that lovely figure in his arms, to rain kisses on the sweet quivering lips, to call her his—his own—his love, though a hundred laws of right and honour barred the way. "I mean it—and I hope my misery will haunt your life, brought as it is by your own hand. To-day you have killed the best part of me. Whatever happens in the future lies at your door."

"Do not say that," she implores.

"I will. If I go to the dogs you have driven me there, and you know it. I have loved you since I was a boy—since we played together in our childhood. I have been cold to all temptations, to all that would make me less worthy of you, simply because that love lay like a charm upon my heart and kept all evil away. I have worked and toiled, and now, when Fortune smiles—when even your mercenary mother might be content with my prospects—I come to claim you and find you—married. By heaven, Lauraine, I could strangle you, as you stand there with your innocent face looking back to mine, and fling you dead into the arms of the brute who has bought you!"

"Oh! cease for pity's sake," implored the girl, and her hands go up to her face and shut out that angry one

before her, with the lightning-flashes of wrath in the blue eyes, and that agony of soul in every quivering feature. "If you only knew how sorry I am—how I pity you—myself——"

Her voice breaks. For a moment everything is forgotten—her strange absence—her mother's uneasiness—the wondering comments of the guests—of these she never thinks. Just for one single moment they stand face to face, and soul to soul, and see before them the awful shipwreck of two young despairing lives!

"Pity me! Ah, you well may," cries Keith, softening a little at the low, tender voice, and the misery on the young, white face. "God knows I need it. Go—go, while I have strength to let you. If you knew what a hell is in my heart at this present moment, you would wonder I could bid you leave me now. It would be easier to kill you than know I send you back to your—husband."

She shudders as he says those words. He has turned away, so that he may not see the fatally fair face—the drooping grace of the lovely figure round which the costly satin falls in gleaming folds. She moves away; then looks back. His head is bent down on his arms—a sob shakes the strong young frame. It goes to her heart like a knife. Impulsively she approaches, and lays one little hand caressingly on his arm.

"Dear Keith, don't grieve—don't fret for *me*. You are right. I was never worth your love—never! I deserve all the unhappiness that Fate can bring. But first say you forgive me this once; I cannot bear to part in anger from you."

Dangerously soft, dangerously sweet is the pretty voice. It goes straight to the aching heart to which she appeals. With a strong effort he conquers his emotion and looks up—how haggard, how altered is the bright young face she remembers!

"I was a brute to say what I did just now," he exclaims, with rapid contrition. "I am half-mad with pain. Yes, Lorry, I will try and forgive you, though it is

horribly hard. You are not a man ; you don't know—oh God ! how *can* I bear it ! "

She trembles violently as she stands beside him ; the folds of her dress sweep across his feet, the faint, sweet perfume of the orange-flowers steals over his senses. He bows his burning forehead down upon her hands, and for a moment is silent too.

" I *must* go," whispers the girl desperately, at last. " Good-bye, Keith—darling Keith. For my sake, try and bear up now ; and oh, promise me you won't carry out your awful threat ; you won't go to the—bad."

" I can't promise any such thing," he says, relapsing into gloom and anger once more. " You don't know what you've done to me. I never was particularly good, and if I tried to be, it was simply for *your* sake. Now my anchor is gone, and I am cut adrift. Whatever evil I do lies at your door, as I said before ! "

" You are cruel—cowardly to say that ! " she cries quickly. " I have not been blameless, but I have not been false to you in my heart—that I know, and if you had only told me, only written——"

" Your mother made me promise I would hold no communication with you for four years ! " he says eagerly. " At the end of that time my prospects began to brighten. This Mr. Hezekiah Jefferson took me up, and then promised to leave me all his fortune. He was rich as Crœsus, and hadn't a relative in the world. I told her all this, and begged her to tell you. I had no answer from either. Then old Hezekiah died, and I jumped clear into two million dollars. I rushed home as soon as I could put things square, and get here—just too late ! Do you expect me to sit down like a tame cat, and console myself by saying it can't be helped ? I think you know my nature better than that ? "

She drew a long, quivering sigh. " If I had but known ? " she says.

" So your mother never told you ? I was a fool to trust her. Women don't seem to have more honour

than they have constancy. But it's no use going over the old ground. You are lost to me, and I don't care two straws what becomes of me now. There, I see you are impatient to be off. Good-bye, don't let me detain you from your—husband ! "

He rises as he speaks, and all the old evil light comes back to his eyes and his face. The girl looks sadly, reproachfully at him ; she is white and trembling—this scene has tried her terribly.

" Shall I—shall we see you again ? " she asks faintly.

" No," he says, drawing his brows together in an angry frown. " I am not going to intrude myself as a spectator of your happiness. I shall take myself off at once."

" And will you not be—friends ? Am I never to see you ? " she says with a foolish longing that he may not pass utterly out of her life—a longing she feels to be wrong, and yet cannot refrain from expressing.

A sudden light flashes up into the young man's face, then fades, and it grows black and thunderous once more. " If I see you again it will either be a great deal better, or a great deal—worse—for us both," he says huskily. " You had better not tempt me, Lauraine."

A great wave of crimson flushes her face. Her eyes sink before the sudden fire and passion that leap up beneath those dusky lashes of his.

" Good-bye ! " she says again, and holds out her hand. " We do part—friends ? "

He hesitates for a second's space, then a cold, strange smile comes to his lips. " Certainly—the best of friends, Lady Vavasour." The door opens as those mocking words escape his lips. Before them stands Mrs. Douglas, her face white and anxious.

" I am just coming, mamma," says Lauraine calmly. " I cannot prevail upon Mr. Athelstone to join us at breakfast ! "

" So pleased to see you, my dear Keith ! " says Mrs. Douglas sweetly. " Only such an unfortunate time for a visit. Impossible to hear all your news. We must

have a long, quiet chat together when all this is over. Lauraine, my dear, you must really come back to the drawing-room. Can't we prevail upon you, Keith?"

"No, you can't," says Keith rudely. "I have been so long away from fashionable society that I am afraid I shouldn't get on with your guests. But I am quite ready to have a chat with you, Mrs. Douglas, when you can favour me with your company. I think we have something besides news to discuss."

"Most happy—delighted, I'm sure," answers Mrs. Douglas vaguely. "I will write and tell you what day, my dear Keith. So many engagements just now, you know."

She sails out of the room, with Lauraine beside her.

"Really, Keith has become quite American," she says complainingly. "So altered—so quite too coarse, and all that. It makes me shudder to hear him speak. He will be just like the Bradshaw Woollffes, I suppose. What a time you were with him, Lauraine—such bad form, you know! However, I am glad he's going. It would have been quite unpleasant if he had stayed."

Lauraine draws her hand away from her mother's arm, and looks her steadily in the face.

"You are right," she says, "it *would*."

Mrs. Douglas feels anything but comfortable as she meets that cold gaze. But in her heart she says:

"How fortunate that he did not come sooner—even yesterday!"

She almost shudders as she thinks of the "slip" that might have been between the costly cup she had been occupied in raising, and the lips to which it had been successfully carried. "All is safe now, though," she thinks. "But how thankful I shall be when she is fairly off. Was ever such a wedding day as this?"

And then she sails into her splendid rooms, and receives congratulations, and flutters about in graceful agitation, and feels that if ever a mother deserves the victor's crown of matrimonial success she deserves it.

Of course all danger is over now. Do not all novels end with a wedding? Are not all Society's daughters considered settled and established once the ring is on, and the rice and slippers thrown? Still, as she looks at her daughter's face, an odd little uncomfortable feeling thrills her heart. There is something so strange, so *dead*-looking about bright, beautiful Lauraine.

But she is married—safely married now. What is there to fear in the future, to regret in the past? Ay, *what?*

CHAPTER IV

A COLD, wet afternoon in March. But a few days ago people believed in spring. There was abundance of sunshine, of blue sky, of tender, venturesome birds; there had been piles of violets and primroses in the flower-girls' baskets, as they moved about the London streets; a breath of genuine spring-time in the soft air; but now all was cold and bleak and drear once more, and people went back shiveringly to fires and furs, and abused the treacherous English climate to their hearts' content. The external cold and dreariness were shut out effectually in a house in fashionable Mayfair. A sort of small drawing-room, opening off the grandeur and luxury of a larger one; a room with a hundred costly knick-knacks scattered about, with velvet draperies, and filled with hothouse flowers, and over which the fire-gleams played.

A silver tea-urn stands hissing on a low table by the fire—dainty cups stand beside it. All is warm, fragrant, pleasant to the eye and the senses, and a silvery babble of women's voices adds life to the scene.

"What has become of your young friend, Mr. Athelstone?" asks a pretty, fair woman, as she puts down her cup, and turns to the presiding goddess of the ceremonies—a big, imposing-looking woman, magnificently dressed.

"He's in Rome still," she answers, with a strong

American accent. " Means to stay there, too, I surmise —leastways, until the Vavasours come to town. Wonderful pretty woman Lady Vavasour—Lady Lauraine, as the poetry man calls her. You know that story ? "

" No," chime in two or three voices. " What was it ? "

" Well, he was an Italian," says the lady, who rejoices in the name of Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe, " and very poor, I believe, living in a garret, and that sort, but a right down poet, so every one says *now*, and Lady Vavasour found him out, and had his book published, and it took like wildfire and of course he's eternal grateful to her, and he wrote something on her—called her ' My Lady Lauraine '—sounds pretty, don't it—and the name was taken up, and in Rome no one called her anything else. She was quite the sensation of the day there ; but she *is* wonderful pretty, and no pumpkins about *that.*"

" She's been married—let me see——"

" Two years, just upon. She's very delicate—that's why they went to Rome. Chest, or lungs, or something. An almighty pretty baby she's got too, and don't she seem fond of it ! As a rule, mothers nowadays don't even bother their heads about their children—'ceptin' to dress 'em like dolls, and take 'em out as a show in their carriages."

One or two fashionable mothers present wince a little at Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe's outspoken opinion, and feel more than ever convinced that she is dreadfully vulgar, and really it would be quite impossible to know her, only she is so amazingly rich.

" And she and Mr. Athelstone are great friends, you say ? " questions another voice.

" Yes," answers Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe shortly. " Knew each other as children ; brought up as brother and sister, and all that."

" How very charming," simpers an inane-looking model of fashion, settling her bonnet strings, and wishing that some men would take it into their heads to drop in

and relieve the monotony of feminine society. "*That* sort of relationship is so free and easy, and no one can say anything. But I heard that the Vavasours are coming back for the season?"

"So they are—at least Keith told me so when he last wrote. I knew him in New York," she added explanatorily. "He is a nice boy; deserves his luck, too. Uncommon rich, ain't he. My! two million dollars ain't bad; and I'm not sure if it ain't more. Old Hezekiah Jefferson was a relation of my niece. He was a warm man, he was, and this boy's got all."

"He ought to marry," suggests a Belgravian matron, who has two daughters "out," and a third budding into bloom, and becoming obtrusively anxious to show herself among the rosebud "garden of girls," who blossom in the London season.

"Marry?" And Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe laughs. "I guess he don't think of that yet awhile. He's too young, and he likes his liberty; he's a bit skittish, too, but that's not much account as some go. Marryin' will be more than he'll care about for a long time to come, even though the girls do go after him like squir'ls after cobs. But then he's uncommon handsome, too."

"Perhaps his *friend*, Lady Lauraine, as you call her, would object to his settling down?" suggests the Belgravian matron, with a little more acidity than sweetness in her well-modulated voice.

Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe puts down her teacup, and looks straight at the speaker,

"In *our* country," she remarks, "people say right down what they think. I don't know what you mean, but I guess. Lady Lauraine is a good woman and a good wife, and she'd be glad enough to see her old playfellow settled and happy; but, you see it's difficult for a rich fellow to know whether it's himself or his money that the girl takes him for, and I suspect Keith would like to be sure on that subject before he jumped into matrimony."

There is a momentary hush among the fair tea-drinkers; but all are agreed in their minds that Americans have an unpleasantly coarse way of putting things.

"It's four years ago since I came to Eu-rope," resumed Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. "I've got more spry about your ways than I was. But there's one thing I don't hold with, and that is that you don't believe in your women. Our Amurcan girls, now, go to their balls, and parties, and skatin' matches, and junketings, and the young fellows see them home and 'squire them about, and we don't think no harm of it; and as for scandal, why, we'd call a man a blackguard who'd say a word against a girl's character for goin' about with another man. It's a point of honour with *them* to treat 'em just as respectfully as if a hundred mothers and chaperons were looking on. Now, here in Europe you're all in such a mortal funk, not only with your gals, but with your married women. You don't seem to believe in such a thing as friendship. Why, if a man and a woman like to talk to each other there's a scandal directly! I surmise it's your way, but it bothers me, that it does."

There is a little titter among the fair worshippers at the shrine of tea and riches.

"Dear Mrs. Woollffe, you do say such odd things; but I think you quite mistake. We are certainly particular with our girls. We must be. Society would be scandalized if they went about in the free-and-easy fashion of their American cousins. But with married women it is quite different. We are really *free*—more free, I think, than your countrywomen; and as for *friendship*—dear me, that is quite allowable—quite!"

"Of course," chime in several voices in the background, for all the attention of the conclave is aroused now. "But then there are friendships, *and* friendships."

"Exactly," says Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe drily. "It is the '*and*' ones I mean. How is it you know so well who may not look at the halter, and who may steal the horse?"

"It is—it is somewhat difficult to explain," hesitates the pretty fair woman, who has a charming "friendship" of her own on hand just now, and is anxious it should be considered as blameless as, of course, it is.

Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe laughs loudly.

"I surmise it is," she answers, "something like the people one can't know and the people one can. I suppose as long as one's got a pretty big pile, one can do anything."

"But to return to Mr. Athelstone," says Belgravia, a little uncomfortably. "Don't you really know when he'll come back?"

"Perhaps I do," answers Mrs. Woollffe, with an odd little smile. "He's just promised to come and stay with me the end of the month. I have a niece—a very pretty girl she is, too—coming over from N' York, and as they knew each other in Amurca, I thought it would be company like for them to be together."

Horror and consternation fill the heart of the Belgravian matron. The prospects of her two daughters who are "out," and the blushing *ingénue* in prospective, flee further and further back into the regions of disappointment.

What an odious woman! What a horrible woman! What on earth does she mean? Oh, if only she were poor, and if only the Earl of Longleat hadn't taken her up, how she would crush her now beneath aristocratic scorn. But—well, it never does *quite* to fall out with so much money, and lose all the dinners, balls, and receptions which the wealthy widow gives right royally in the season. So the ire is smothered and the frowns dispelled, and only the sweetest of phrases issue from lips that are absolutely trembling with hatred and disgust. The rooms grow emptier and emptier. The last visitor leaves, and Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe leans back in her most comfortable chair, and laughs softly to herself in the glow of the firelight.

"We don't raise *that* sort down our way," she says,

" and I'm glad of it. Well, I think I riled 'em with that bit about Anastasia, and it's no cram either. She is uncommon pretty, and ought to take. I shouldn't mind getting a bid for her, only she's that sweet on Keith I'm afraid it won't be easy. But he don't care a red herring for her—*that* I know. I wonder what's become of the girl he told me of in N' York that fall. He ain't married her, and when I asked him why, he cut up mighty rough, and as good as told me to mind my own business. But I like that Keith. I wish he seemed a bit happier, that I do. He's not near so spry and lively as he used to be. How all these women are after him! Guess I got a rise out of them *that* time. My, if they knew he was coming here to-night! 'Taint none of their business though, and I don't mean it to be. I think I'll keep the dragons off him better'n most. I and—Anastasia!"

And she laughs again, a pleasant, cheery laugh, not with any insincere modulation or false ring like the laugh of Society. But with all her vulgarities and eccentricities, Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe is a genuine woman.

She pours herself out another cup of tea, and looks complacently round her pretty room; and as she looks, there comes the sound of a step on the stairs, and the door is thrown open, and a tall figure comes straight to her amidst the obscurity, and she springs up to welcome him with a cordiality so genuine that Society would doubtless call it vulgar.

" Keith, my dear boy—so you've come. I'm *real* glad to see you, that I am."

Her visitor takes the two hands she extends him, and returns their warm pressure. Then she forces him into a chair by the fire, and stirs the logs into a blaze, and brings him some tea, and fusses about him in a pleasant, genial, womanly fashion that is all her own.

Keith Athelstone accepts her attentions with laughing opposition against the amount of trouble she is taking; but on the whole he likes it, and he likes her too, for she has been a kind friend to him in days gone by, when he

was only poor and struggling—a stranger in a strange land, not yet having "struck ile" in the way of fortune and success.

"And so you have really left Rome?" says Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe at last, when her guest is reclining lazily in his chair, and has begged her not to ring for lights or disturb the cosy solitude of the room. "And how are the Vavasours?"

A little change is visible in the face of the young man—a face strangely altered in these two years. The features are handsome as ever, but there is a haggard, worn look about them, and the blue eyes are feverish and dim, and heavy shadows lie beneath the long dark lashes.

Those eyes and lashes are the greatest beauty in Keith Athelstone's face, and now that haunting look of sadness gives them tenfold more attraction than they possessed before. "They are quite well," he says, after a brief pause; "they come to town next week."

"I wonder you did not wait and come with them."

"Lady Vavasour did not wish it," he answers quietly.

Mrs. Woollffe gives him a quick glance and is silent.

"I've had a troop of women here," she says presently. "Glad you didn't come in the midst of their chatter. My, they'll be after you like flies after molasses this season, Keith! Take care you aren't married in spite of yourself."

"Married?" his voice rings out with angry energy; "not if I know it. I *hate* women."

"Hate 'em?—that's queer," remarks Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. "Something's wrong with you, then. Boys at your age aren't women-haters for nothing."

"I mean, of course, those husband-hunting creatures," says Keith apologetically. "Why can't they let a fellow alone, I wonder?"

"Can't say, I'm sure, unless it's just their malice drives 'em on one against the other, and each tries to be foremost with the traps and gins. When a man's got money, I suppose they think it ain't right unless he

shares it with a female. And there's such an almighty lot of women in Great Britain. Nice enough, too, some of 'em; I like 'em better'n Amurcans. They've a real good time of it out here, too. When we get married, we're shelved—done for. We let the young 'uns have their time; but, lor' bless me, *here* the married women seem to have the best of the fun, and are as skittish as colts, even when they're forty."

"Yes, that's so," answered Keith. "In these days married women—so long as they're pretty—command more admiration and attention than the girls. The fact of being appropriated seems to lend them a greater charm. Perhaps, though, men think they're safer. The mothers make such dead running, you know, and if you dance twice with a girl, suspect 'intentions.'"

"It's bad, though," says Mrs. Woollffe, shaking her head. "Bad for Society—bad for men—bad for the girls, too. They'll marry the first man who asks them, because they think they'll have more real freedom afterwards. But what sort of wives and mothers will they make?"

"Those are secondary points of consideration"—sneers Keith, and his face looks hard and almost cruel now, as the flames leap up and frame it in their sudden brightness. "Old-fashioned ideas like truth and constancy, and all that."

"Come, I can't have you getting cynical," says his friend good-humouredly. "You're too young, and I hate to hear young fellows like yourself railing against women. It don't seem right, somehow. What do you know of them? They're mighty queer creatures, and would puzzle the wisest man; but all the same, they're not all downright bad, and you mustn't judge the whole bale from a poor sample."

Keith says nothing. His eyes go back to the fire, and a cloud darkens his brow. He knows in his own heart that he hates all women, only because he loves one—too well.

CHAPTER V

In the dressing-room of her Park Lane mansion a woman stands dressed for the evening.

Her face is lovely, her toilet exquisite, a rain of diamonds seems to glitter about her; but there is no gladness in the eyes that gaze at their own reflection, and an unnatural gravity and sadness seem to sit on the white brow and round the soft young lips.

It is the face of Lauraine—Lady Vavasour.

A maid enters with a bouquet and a note, and gives them to her. "Sir Francis desired me to say he was waiting, my lady," she says respectfully.

"I will be down immediately. You can take my cloak," answers her mistress.

The maid leaves the room, and Laura opens the note and reads the few lines it contains. Her face does not change except to grow even sadder for a moment. Then she tears up the letter, and taking the flowers in her hand, sweeps slowly away. She moves across the richly carpeted corridor, and enters another room facing her own. It is dimly lighted, and all its draperies are pure white, and the furniture of satinwood. In one corner stands a little cot, the lace curtains looped back with pale azure ribbons. A woman rises at her entrance, and stands up respectfully. Lauraine passes her, and goes over to the little bed and looks down with eyes full of love unutterable at its inmate.

A child lies there asleep. Soft, dusky rings of hair curl round the broad, white brow—the cheeks are flushed like a rose—the tiny scarlet mouth is half open—the little hands lie outside the snowy coverlet. Lauraine's face grows transfigured as she looks on that baby form; such love—such rapture—such pure, holy, exquisite joy irradiates it! She stoops down and presses her lips to the baby brow—takes one long, idolizing look at the cherubic loveliness that is her dearest earthly treasure,

and then whispers some parting injunctions to the nurse and leaves the room.

"How long you have been! What a deuce of a time you women do take to put your gowns on," grumbles her husband, as he meets her at the bottom of the stairs. "The horses have been standing out there in the cold for more than half an hour."

Lauraine makes a sign to her maid to put on her wraps, and then follows her husband out to the carriage. He has not looked at her—he has not noticed one detail of the exquisite toilette—his voice in addressing her is harsh and impatient, and they have been married but two years. Yet the coldness and indifference she now receives is ten thousand times preferable, she thinks, to the frantic passion that he had once bestowed. He had been mad to have her, and he had won her! Now—well, now that infatuation looked as absurd as it had once been imperative. It is a man's nature; it always has been and always will be so.

Lauraine too feels strangely changed. She seems to have grown cold, hard, indifferent to everything. These two years seem like ten. This is her first season in London since she married, and she looks upon it as a duty enforced, and with not one throb of pleasure or anticipation. She is young, rich, and very lovely; but she carries a heavy heart within that beautiful bosom, and knows that the one great error of her life is ever demanding compensation.

Six months ago she and Keith Athelstone met again. He had gone back to New York after her marriage, to settle his affairs, and for eighteen months she had neither seen nor heard anything of him. When they met in Rome she had been startled and afraid of the change wrought in so brief a time. He looked years older. The bright, genial, sunny temper that had given him so great a charm was now sullen, uncertain, and bitter. He was restless, extravagant, and capricious. Much that she had heard of him pained and annoyed

her deeply ; but she scarcely dared remonstrate for fear of being met with a sneer or a reproach. Her husband took an unaccountable fancy to the young fellow, and had him constantly at their house ; but it frightened Lauraine to see the hatred and contempt that at times flashed out in Keith's eyes and voice against the man who called him friend. No word of the past—no allusion to that wedding-morning of hers—ever passed between the young man and herself. She almost hoped he had forgotten his boyish passion—would be content to accept the friendship she had once proffered him, and he had rejected so scornfully.

For herself nothing seemed to signify much now. The whole tenderness of her nature spent itself on her child.

If she could have had her way, she would have liked to live in the quiet old Northumbrian house which was her husband's, and there given herself exclusively up to the care and teaching of her boy. But such a wild idea, was of course, scouted and ridiculed.

Her husband was proud of her in a way—proud of the sparkling beauty, the dainty grace, the mind and manners of the woman he had made his wife. She would never be fast or vulgar, or think only of conquests and admiration, and drag his name through the mire of scandal. No ; she would always be *safe*—that he felt, and if he had grown tired of her he was determined that the world should see and admire her, and applaud his choice. It would gratify his vanity, just as it had done in Rome, where she had been courted and worshipped and eulogized everywhere as " Lady Lauraine."

The carriage rolls smoothly and swiftly on. Lauraine leans back, with her eyes gazing dreamily out at the lighted streets. Her husband breaks the silence at last.

" I want you to be specially civil to Lady Jean," he says abruptly. " You were very stand-offish when she called on you the other day. She's the most popular woman in London, and the prettiest. You two ought to be friends."

"I don't like her," answers Lauraine coldly.

"Don't like her!" he sneers. "No, of course not. That's just like a woman. The moment a man praises one of your own sex to you, it's quite sufficient reason for you to dislike her. Pray, what's your objection?"

Lauraine colours faintly.

"She is loud and fast. She ridicules every good and honest feeling, and I think she is very malicious."

"The secret of her success perhaps," laughs her husband. "People are afraid of her sharp tongue. *Tant mieux.* But she is at all events a woman one would not get tired of. Few know how to make themselves more agreeable."

"To men, perhaps."

"Well, that's paying us a great compliment. A woman making herself agreeable to women is taking a great deal of trouble for no purpose unless, of course, they have the *entrée* where she has not. But Lady Jean goes everywhere."

"And Lady Jean's husband?" asks Lauraine.

Sir Francis laughs. "Well, one doesn't see much of him certainly. But he's worth nearly a million, for all that. The earl wouldn't have let his daughter marry him if he hadn't been."

"Was Lady Jean poor?"

"Very poor. The Earl of Killery had six daughters. She was the youngest, and the only one who has married. She's been married six years now."

"You knew her before—before——" hesitates Lauraine.

"Before I married you? Oh, yes. We were very good friends always. That's why I hope you and she will hit it off. She'll be of great use to you."

Lauraine is silent. In her own mind she thinks she shall never be able to "hit it off," as Sir Francis expresses it. She and Lady Jean are totally opposite in many respects, and she has that instinctive antipathy to her which a pure and high-principled woman often conceives for one whose morals are lax, whose nature is

coarse, whose views, tastes and opinions are utterly antagonistic to her own.

The carriage stops at last. They get out and are marshalled up a crowded staircase and into yet more crowded rooms. Lady Jean Saloman receives them cordially. She looks radiant. If not a positively beautiful woman she at least is a woman who always contrives to make herself immediately noticed even amidst beauty. She is very tall; dresses superbly: wears jewels fit for an empress, and is too much a woman of the world not to know the worth of popularity.

Her own birth and breeding were irreproachable, and she could be *grande dame* to the tips of her toes when she pleased. But when the part did not suit, she varied it according to her own fancy. She was not a young woman now—that is to say, she was on the wrong side of thirty; but she was handsome and dashing-looking, and had a host of admirers, and did pretty much as she liked with her husband, who was a dark Jewish-looking man, rarely seen in her drawing-rooms, but known to have carried many wonderful speculations to a successful issue, and to have so much money that even her wildest extravagances could be indulged without fear of consequences.

Lady Jean was on the very highest pinnacle of social success at present, and the novelty amused her, though the fact of being constantly *en grande tenue* was rather a bore, and there was a dash of Bohemianism in her character, due to her Irish blood, which would have vent occasionally. The said element, however, was kept carefully out of sight of the very great and exclusive personages who received her as one of themselves. She slipped into her two characters as occasion demanded, and played them so skilfully that her respective audiences applauded each with rapture, and took each as the real thing.

Those outside that magic pale of "exclusiveness" sighed enviously as they saw her leave their ranks from

time to time, and soar upwards to that purer and rarer stratum of the social atmosphere which their lungs were deemed unfit to breathe. "We are quite as good as she," they would murmur discontentedly.

And so they doubtless were, only they had not learnt her secret—the secret of keeping on good terms with Society, and yet indulging in a hundred little frolicsome escapades by way of variety, without offending the strait-laced prejudices and high-toned morality of the one set, or debarring herself from the questionable amusements of the other.

To-night Lady Jean is very gracious, very affable, very dignified; her rooms are thronged with great personages. A list of nothing but titles will fill the pages of the *Court Journal* that describes her "reception" to-morrow, and she feels that she is a person of much consequence. Lady Vavasour looks at her with more curiosity than she has yet evinced. Her husband's words have aroused her interest.

Lady Jean is attired in some wonderful combination of deep ruby and old gold that suits her dark beauty to perfection. Lauraine gazes at her with a sort of wonder. It has never struck her before that the woman is so marvellously handsome.

They pass on with the rest of the crowd after a few words. In one of the rooms a great singer is singing. Lauraine stands and listens. Some one comes up to her and offers his hand. She just glances up and smiles as she takes it. Neither of them speaks. Only two eager blue eyes take in every detail of her dress and appearance, and give so glad a welcome in their glance that perhaps it is as well she does not see it.

The song is over. The crowd move about. Keith Athelstone bends close to Lauraine. "Let me find you a seat," he says. "These rooms are stifling."

Lauraine nods and takes his arm. Her husband has gone back to the staircase and—Lady Jean.

"I hardly know any one here," she says at last.

"It is the first time I have come to the house."

"Is it?" answers Keith, rather indifferently. "There are heaps of big swells here, I believe. Pity Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe can't be among them. How delighted she would be!"

"How long do you stay with her?" asked Lauraine.

"I scarcely know. I am looking out for a set of rooms; but I haven't found anything I like yet."

"Are you so hard to please?"

"I don't think so. But I must have lots of room and something green to look at. I wonder if I dare ask your assistance in the furnishing line. I'm afraid I shall make an awful muddle of it."

Lauraine laughs. "Are you going in for the æsthetic style—peacock-blue, and sage-green and yellow? Oh, yes—I shall be delighted to help you. We'll drive to Morris's and select things together."

Together! His heart gives a quick throb as he hears that word. He wonders whether she has forgotten. He feels a little impatient of this calm friendliness with which she always treats him. She ignores the past so utterly that at times he feels impelled to say or do something desperate, if only to awaken her from that calm, and know that she *can* feel still.

The attraction she had had for him is potent as ever. All his rage and indignation had not killed it—the barrier in his path seemed but to rouse it to fresh life when they met again.

No woman in the world was to him what Lauraine was. No woman ever would be, he felt assured. Had he been wise he would have shunned her presence so long as he knew it could exercise its old potent witchery.

But who *is* wise that loves?

"She is quite safe," he would tell himself restlessly. "And for myself—if it hurts, it is my own fault. I *must* see her sometimes."

He had grown to look upon Lauraine as martyred to her mother's selfishness. He knew she had never

cared for her husband. He saw that even in this short space of time they were drifting slowly—surely apart.

"And I would have made her so happy!" he thought to himself in those hours of solitude when the maddening recollection of her face was always before him.

He almost hated her at such times; hated her because he could not forget her, and all his riches seemed nothing in comparison with just—her love.

She was quite unsuspicious as yet. She thought he must have got over his boyish infatuation long since, and that their friendship was as real to him as to her. He was careful enough not to undeceive her, for he dreaded above all the sentence of banishment she would inevitably pronounce. She had grown so much colder and prouder since her marriage, he thought.

The seat is found, and side by side they sit, talking of a hundred different things that for them have a common interest. To Lauraine it is the most natural thing in the world that Keith should be beside her, and she can always talk to him as she can to no one else. Yet there is that about her which keeps all dangerous allusions in check, which sometimes chills and sometimes awes the wild, hot, young heart beating so restlessly by her side. He tries a hundred times to speak, and yet—he dares not. "She would never forgive," he thinks to himself. "It would seem almost an insult now."

For he knows that there is one tie which sanctifies her heart, and sets her far above the touch and fear of a selfish passion. It is her love for her child.

"Your wife and her old playfellow seem devoted to each other," remarks Lady Jean, as she leans on Sir Francis Vavasour's arm, and makes the tour of her splendid rooms.

He looks carelessly at the couple in question. They are sitting in an alcove, the soft hues of the hangings and the rich tints of flowers framing them in with a glow of colour. Keith is bending over Lauraine; he

holds her bouquet in his hand, and toys restlessly with the fragrant blossoms. Her face is softly flushed, the long dark lashes sweep her cheek, a little smile, half tender, half sad, plays about her lips.

"What a handsome couple they would have made," continues Lady Jean blandly. "Just seem suited for each other. You ought to feel flattered, *mon ami*, that you carried the day."

"Pshaw! they are like brother and sister," mutters Sir Francis impatiently.

"Are they? How very charming! Only brothers and sisters as a rule don't seem quite so devoted to each other. But, of course, the relationship and the 'seeming' it are two very different things. Do you know, I think your wife is very beautiful."

"You are very good to say so."

Lady Jean laughs. "My flattery is quite sincere. I really admire her very much. She is a little *too* grave and serious, perhaps, but that is a fault on the right side. There is too much fastness and vulgarity in society nowadays. A quiet woman is quite refreshing."

"Lauraine never used to be grave and serious," Sir Francis remarks somewhat moodily. "She was one of the merriest and most amusing girls I ever met."

"Ah!" observes his companion sententiously. "*That* was before she married you. Somehow marriage does alter some women amazingly."

CHAPTER VI

"LAURAINE is very much changed," laments Mrs. Douglas to a select coterie of friends, on one of those chilly spring afternoons when they have dropped in to sip souchong and talk scandal in her pretty drawing-room.

It is her "day." There are heaps of women scattered about—there are a few men. The lights are subdued. There is a pleasant fragrance of tea, and the scents of flowers fill the air, and the babble of many voices sounds cheerfully amidst it all.

"Changed!" says one of the friends to whom she has addressed that remark; in what way?"

"So quiet and cold and—odd," Mrs. Douglas answers; "says she hates society, detests going out, takes up artists and singers, and all sorts of queer people. I really expect to see her going about soon in a terra-cotta gown, and wearing no corsets, and looking as great a fool as Lady Etwynde. So absurd, you know, for a young woman, and a pretty woman. Of course, Lady Etwynde is a duke's daughter, and can do what she likes; besides, she's so lovely nothing could make her a fright, though she only turns it to account by being the most eccentric woman in London. I don't blame her. If you can't be remarkable in one way, it's just as well to be it in another. But the people one meets there—it really is *too* awful. Just the sort of creatures that *Punch* takes off. And Lauraine is always there; so tiresome, because Lady Etwynde's day is the same as mine, and so she can never come here."

"I thought it was odd never meeting her at your house," remarks one of the coterie.

"Yes, that's how it is you never see her," resumes Mrs. Douglas, somewhat hurriedly. "She and Lady Etwynde are inseparable, though I'm sure I can't imagine why."

"I met her—your daughter, I mean—at the Salomans' the other night," remarks a tall, fair woman, leaning languidly back in her chair.

"Yes, I know she was there," says Mrs. Douglas, colouring slightly. "Charming woman, Lady Jean!"

"Very," answers her friend dryly. "I—I suppose Lady Vavasour never heard anything about—*that*."

"Oh, there was nothing—nothing; he assured me so himself. I would not have trusted my child's happiness to his care had he not done so. The world is *so* censorious, dear Mrs. Chetwynde."

Mrs. Chetwynde laughs. "True; but all the same

there is no smoke without fire, you know—and Lady Jean was awfully wild about his marriage."

Mrs. Douglas looked uncomfortable. "I don't know anything about her. But I am quite sure she is all right. She is received everywhere."

"Of course," smiles her friend. "And the very openness of their friendship is guarantee sufficient for its perfect harmlessness; just like Lauraine's with Keith Athelstone."

"Keith Athelstone!" exclaims Mrs. Douglas, turning very white. "What do you mean?"

"They are always together," says Mrs. Chetwynde maliciously. "So they were in Rome, for the matter of that. But, of course, they are very old friends—brought up as children, and all that?"

"Of course," says Mrs. Douglas loftily. "Why, they were like brother and sister. Surely no one is so uncharitable as——"

"My dear, we are all uncharitable, more or less. And Lauraine is very pretty, and Sir Francis not *quite* so devoted as he might be, considering it was a love-match—so you said. I think I should give Lauraine a hint, if I were you."

"Lauraine is quite capable of managing her own affairs," said Mrs. Douglas pettishly. In her own mind she thinks she knows how such a hint would be received. "Keith is only a boy. Lauraine looks upon him just as a brother—always did. She is accustomed to order him about, and have him beside her. Pray don't listen to such ill-natured gossip."

But all the time an uncomfortable memory is rising up before her. She sees a pale young face and the fiery wrath of two blue eyes, and hears the passionate reproaches of Keith Athelstone's lips as he tells her of his ruined life. Good heavens! what does he mean? Why does he stay by Lauraine's side now? She feels nervous and unsettled, and almost resolves she will speak to Lauraine, and give her that word of caution

which her friend has suggested. The world is so wicked, and after all——

Her thoughts are interrupted by fresh arrivals.

Into the exclusive circle in which Mrs. Douglas' soul delights, stride the massive proportions and gorgeous sweeping draperies of Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. Following her is a little dainty figure—a sort of modern Dresden shepherdess in point of colouring and attire. She is introduced by Mrs. Woollffe as "My niece from New York, Miss Anastasia Jane Jefferson."

Every one looks at her. Every one wonders whether it is prettiness, or piquancy, or *chic*, that makes the radiant face so bewitching—the tiny figure so attractive, and one among the coterie, the Belgravian matron, with *demoiselles à marier*, looks virtuously indignant and annoyed at the intrusion.

"She is sure to be fast and talk with that awful twang, that's one comfort," she thinks, as with the coldest and stiffest of bows she greets the new-comer.

But Miss Jefferson is not fast or vulgar, and though her accent and expression are decidedly American, they have a piquant charm of their own that the younger members of the conclave listen to enviously, and the men seem to find irresistibly attractive.

Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe and her niece fairly break up the select groups and *tête à têtes*, and make themselves the centre of attraction and attention. The loud voice and hearty laughter of the elder lady peal through the room, to the utter annihilation of softer voices and confidential whispers.

"We have just come from Lady Etwynde's reception," she says, laughing immoderately. "I reckon you people are having some fun out of your new craze. Guess *she's* gone pretty nigh out of her mind, at all events."

"What was it like? Do tell us," chime in one or two voices—voices of outsiders to whom the Lady—or, as she loved to call herself, the "Ladye"—Etwynde

Fitz-Herbert is a sort of unknown wonder. Her sayings and doings are chronicled by society journals; but her circle of intimates and associates is very limited. They begin to wonder how Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe gained admittance. That lady now informs them.

"Well," she commences, looking round at the attentive faces, "I was calling at Lauraine's—beg pardon, I suppose I should say Lady Vavasour's—and she took me with her and Keith. Keith is a great chum of the 'Ladye' Etwynde's. We got to her house—a real lovely place with a big garden, out Kensington way; all red brick, no windows to speak of, but lots of *frames*, and a hall—my! the queerest place—all done with matting, and so dark, and everywhere double doors and plush curtains, 'of a sad sage-green,' to use Keith's expression. Such a silent place, not a sound anywhere. Well, we went into a room, also very dim and a great deal of green and yellow about it, and huge pots of sunflowers in the windows, and the very queerest chairs, and on every chair sat a woman, and behind every chair stood a man. They were all quite still, and had their eyes fixed on the sunflowers and their bodies twisted into the queerest attitudes. I stared some, I can tell you. Lauraine went up to a tall, beautiful woman dressed in a clinging gown of terra-cotta stuff —such a gown! My! Worth never had anything to do with *that* frock, I guess. She came forward and spoke to me. 'You are not one of us, but you are welcome,' she said. Her voice was very sad and very sweet.

"'This is one of our contemplative afternoons,' she said, when I had bowed—speak, I really couldn't. 'We do but sit still, and *yearn*.'"

"What?" ejaculated the listeners.

"Guess you're through," laughs Mrs. Woollffe. "Well, so was I."

"'Yes,' she went on. 'We yearn for all that is most soul-uplifting. We each set a distinct object before our mind's eye, and absorb ourselves in its

contemplation. These moments are truly precious for those who can be brought to appreciate their intensity. We are most of us earnest students of our faith—disciples of culture—worshippers of the beautiful—the far-reaching—the subtle—the sublime!'

"'And don't you ever speak?' I asked her; for of all the vacant-eyed, sleepy idiots in creation I never came across such a set as were 'yearning' there.

"'Speak—oh yes—in season and at proper times,' she says. 'But thought is often more beautiful than words, and language is deficient in much that might clothe and dignify our ideas.'

"Keith chimed in here. 'Yes,' he said; 'they *are* apt to sound ridiculous when it comes to clothing them in common-place speech.'" The listeners exchange glances.

"And this was really how they went on—how idiotic!" murmurs Mrs. Douglas. "I knew Lady Etwynde was always very eccentric, but I think she is quite going out of her mind now. I hope she won't imbue Lauraine with any of her absurd ideas. How was she dressed—Lauraine, I mean?"

"Oh! quite æsthetic!" exclaims Mrs. Woollffe. "Indian silk, creamy coloured, big puffs, and very clinging about the skirt, and an 'intense' hat. I know it was intense, because Keith said so."

"What made Mr. Athelstone go to such a nonsensical affair?" demands Mrs. Douglas, frowning.

"Didn't ask him. S'pose he likes to 'yearn' a bit also. Perhaps it's refreshing to fix one's mind on an object and meditate upon it. Can't say myself. Don't think I ever tried it."

"And didn't they *do* anything?" inquires Mrs. Chetwynde.

"They talked an almighty queer jargon, if that was doing anything. A lot about 'disciples' and 'searching after the unknown,' and the 'abstruseness of the beautiful,' which was the religion of culture. Lauraine saw some snowdrops and violets and admired them,

and then some one burst out about the fierce beauty of the sunflower and the grand teachings of the tiger-lily. I confess I felt beat then, and said so, but Lady Etwynde only smiled that sad, pale smile of hers, and murmured: 'Ah, Nature has much to teach you. Her great marvels are yet a blank. To comprehend her is a power given only to the chosen few.' I felt uncommon near saying that *she* resembled Nature there, for I am blessed if I comprehended her."

"And one hears such wonderful stories about this Lady Etwynde," murmurs a voice in the background. "Really, it seems quite disappointing."

"She is real pretty," remarks Miss Anastasia Jefferson.

"Pretty? But then she dresses so oddly, and her hair——"

"A club behind and a nimbus in front," laughs the pretty American. "Trying, but still seems to suit her. Real cunning she looked when she lay back in her chair with her eyes turned up—so."

She imitates her so exactly that there is a well-bred ripple of laughter among the circle, but behind Miss Jefferson's back they will all denounce the vulgarity and bad taste of ridiculing any one to whose house she had just been. Of course, they themselves never do such things! Mrs. Douglas draws a little nearer to Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. She wants to question her concerning Keith Athelstone.

"You might have brought your young friend here," she says affably.

"Guess he didn't want to come," answers Mrs. Woollffe bluntly. "At least he said so."

Mrs. Douglas colours faintly. "He has so many engagements; money of course makes a young man immensely popular," she says, with a cold smile.

"'Tain't money that's got anything to do with Keith Athelstone's popularity," answers Mrs. Woollffe sharply. "He's just one of the nicest young fellows I've ever known, and people don't take long to find that out. His

manners are perfect. He can dress like a gentleman without looking a fop. He's plenty to say and says it well, and he's most uncommonly good-looking. Ain't that enough to make a young man run after?"

"Still," says Mrs. Douglas sweetly, "if he had no money, Society would turn its back on him to-morrow."

"Society?" echoes Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. "I guess you mean the mothers in society. I've my own opinion about the gals."

"Does he—does he seem to care about any woman in particular?" asks Mrs. Douglas. "I suppose he means to marry and settle down now."

"Guess he don't," says Mrs. Woollffe. "Likes to be free, so he says, and quite right too."

"Then there is no one—no girl—he pays attention to," persists Mrs. Douglas determinedly.

Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe looks at her with aroused curiosity, and a faint smile comes to her lips. "Oh, yes, there is *some one* he pays great attention to," she says, slowly and distinctly, "but no girl as you say—she is a married woman."

CHAPTER VII

THE season rolls on with Fashion tied to its wheels. Society is on its treadmill once more, hard at work and calling it pleasure. To young Lady Vavasour, courted and admired as she is, the life seems to have grown ineffably wearisome. All around her now is gorgeous, restless, insatiable. She plays her own part amidst it all, and finds an endless monotony about it. The glare, the fever, the unrest, oppress her with a vague wonder and an inward contempt, for those who live in it and for it alone, and misname the craving for false excitement—pleasure.

She has seen very little of her husband this season. He has his own engagements and occupations—she hers. Lauraine feels often very lonely and very

sad. The total want of sympathy between Sir Francis and herself becomes more and more apparent, and she knows very well that among all her host of acquaintances there is not one whom she can really count as a friend—except, perhaps, Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe.

Of late a strange fear has come to her—one she hardly dares breathe to herself. It is connected with Keith Athelstone. She has been trying to make herself believe that that youthful episode is quite forgotten ; that her marriage has put it out of his head ; that his plainly shown preference for her society is only the outcome of past association. He has said no word to undeceive her ; but then perhaps words are the least dangerous of the shafts of warfare in Love's armoury. A look, a sigh, a broken sentence—these often convey more than any set form of speech, and between Keith and Lauraine is a subtle comprehension that makes them utterly independent of words. A look across a crowded room, a smile at some witticism caught by their ears when in the midst of some brilliant circle, a glance as some words of a song, or tender strain of music, touch some memory in their hearts, or awake a thrill of pain or pleasure—these are enough to draw them together by the imperceptible links of a common sympathy. But in it all Lauraine suspects no danger. It seems to her that they are so utterly divided, it is impossible Keith can forget that fact. Perhaps he does forget it, but not in the way she imagines.

The Lady Etwynde is holding a reception. It is not purely æsthetic this time, and " yearning " is not an item of the programme. Literary people, dramatic people, artistic people, musical people—a strange and somewhat odd-looking throng—crowd the " sad green " rooms, which are all thrown open *en suite*, and where the " fierce beauty " of the sunflower may be seen in all its glory this warm summer night.

Dissimilar as they seem, yet Lauraine and Lady

Etwynde are very good friends. Lauraine has discovered how much good sense, cleverness and cordial feeling live beneath that mask of eccentricity which the fair æsthete shows to the outer world, and she finds her entertainments far more amusing than many of the others she attends.

To-night Lauraine comes alone, Sir Francis having declined to be present at what he terms "such d——d humbug." It is nearly midnight when she arrives, and the rooms are crowded. She sees the Lady Etwynde attired in a fearful and wonderful gown, with skirts more clinging, and puffs more voluminous, and hair more "tousled" than ever, and in her hand is a fan of peacock's feathers, which she from time to time waves slowly and gracefully to and fro.

Even all her enemies and detractors cannot deny that the Lady Etwynde is essentially beautiful and graceful. Her every movement and attitude are a study; her soft, clinging draperies float and sway to her rhythmic motions in a way that is at once the envy and despair of her imitators and admirers. To see her walk across a room is a treat—a poem, as her disciples say, and countless have been the effusions inspired by her doing so.

As Lauraine greets her, Keith Athelstone approaches. She had not expected to find him there, and a little flush of pleasure rises to her face.

The Lady Etwynde looks at them with grave, soft eyes, and a little puzzled wonder on her face. She has heard some of the buzzing from Society's wings, and she is beginning also to notice that Keith is the very shadow of the beautiful "Lady Lauraine."

"I have a great treat in store for you," she says, in her slow, soft voice; "Signor Alfieri has promised to sing for me to-night. You know him, do you not?"

"I have heard him at the opera, of course," says Lauraine. "But never in a room. How charming."

"He is the most perfect Faust I have ever seen on the stage," continues the Lady Etwynde. "To hear

him sing the 'Salve Dimora' is quite too exquisitely divine. Yes; he is going to honour my poor little entertainment."

"You are very fortunate," remarks Keith Athelstone. "I know he refused to sing at the Duchess of St. Alban's 'At Home' the other night, despite all entreaties."

"We must not miss a note," says the hostess tranquilly. "I think I will ask him to sing now. I have been waiting for Lauraine."

Keith offers his arm, but the "Ladye" declines it, and makes a sign to an æsthetic poet, who looks starved enough to be "yearning" after the substantial goods of life. Then she floats off in her swaying, sensuous fashion, and Keith and Lauraine follow in silence. Seldom has Lauraine looked so lovely as she does to-night. Her dress is of the palest primrose shade, and of that exquisitely soft texture of silk called *satin merveilleux*, which drapes itself in graceful, clinging folds. A bodice and train of this shows a mass of creamy lace beneath. Some Gloire de Dijon roses nestle at her bosom, and a few more carelessly intermingled with maidenhair fern, and knotted together by long trails of primrose-coloured ribbon, are held in her hand. Her hair is without ornament, and the beautiful throat and neck are unmarred by any jewels, and gleam white as marble.

Keith Athelstone's heart gives one great painful throb as he moves on by her side. He thinks he has never seen her look so exquisite, so dangerously attractive, as to-night. "Sir Francis not coming?" he says carelessly, and from his voice no one would suspect the feelings at work within his breast.

"No," says Lauraine. "He doesn't like æstheticism, you know."

"They are not in such strong force to-night," says Keith, glancing round to see to whom Lauraine has just bowed. "Still, a good many planted about, I think.

It's the men get over me. Did you ever see such guys?"

"Can't Lady Etwynde convert you?" asks Lauraine, smiling a little.

"To make myself up in that fashion—no, thank you. Besides, Nature hasn't given me the class of features necessary, and I don't suppose even a prolonged course of starvation would reduce me to such skinniness in the matter of legs and arms as those 'yearners' can boast of."

"No; it would take a good time to make you thin, I imagine," Lauraine answers, with an involuntary glance at the splendid proportions of her old playmate. "So much the better. All men should be tall and well-made. Nature should establish it as a rule."

"And all women beautiful, of course?"

"Beauty is not the only attraction a woman need possess," Lauraine says thoughtfully. "I remember hearing some one remark once that the most beautiful women might win the greatest amount of admiration, but not the greatest love."

"There is a class of beauty that can command both. Of course, there are women who are eaten up with the vanity and satisfaction of their own charms. To my thinking, no amount of personal loveliness could compensate for bad temper, ignorance, or self-conceit."

"I think so too," Lauraine answers, meeting a sudden glance of the blue eyes, and colouring faintly beneath the warm admiration they speak. "But, as a rule, men go mad after a beautiful face, and don't trouble themselves about anything else beneath it."

"I should never do that," Keith remarks quietly. "I like a woman for what is in her—not for the straight features, and fair complexion, and good eyes."

"You are hard to please," Lauraine remarks, glancing down at her flowers.

He makes her no answer whatever.

There is a sudden hush now in the crowded rooms—a silence of expectation. Keith finds a seat for Lauraine on a low ottoman near one of the windows, and

stands there beside her. The moon is shining clear and brilliant in the sky above, and streams over the quaint flower-beds and trees in the garden. The sweet sultry summer night is full of beauty and fragrance—it acts like a spell on the warm, imaginative temperament and ardent fancy of the young man.

Across the silence a chord of music breaks. With his eyes still fixed on the garden and the sky, Keith Athelstone waits and listens.

The voice of the great singer thrills across the rooms in that most exquisite of strains which Faust utters to his love. Lauraine's heart grows chill for a moment, then leaps up and beats with a sudden vivid emotion that fills her veins like fire, and holds her spell-bound to the end. In that moment it seems to her as if some revelation had come of all she has missed in life. The passionate music finds its way to her very soul, and holds in suspense life, thought, memory.

There is a lull—a pause, and then a torrent of acclamation fills the air. The charm is snapped.

The hands that hold the roses tremble visibly. She sits there and is silent, and does not look up at the face above her for answering sympathy, because of this strange dread and ecstasy he may read upon her own.

He *has* read it, despite the downcast eyes. He has read it, and his own heart grows rapturous with a sudden delight, and cold with as sudden a dread.

Fresh applause—fresh entreaties. A moment's silence, and then the great singer seats himself at the piano, and pours out again in the matchless melody of his voice these words:

The old, old pain of earth
On land or sea,
And all that makes life worth
For you or me.
What is it, darling, say,
While stars shine on above,
What makes us glad or gay?
'Tis love—'tis love!

The world's old weariness,
What can it be,
And all life's sad mistakes
That sad lives see.
What makes them, darling, say,
While here we hold our bliss:
What makes us glad to day?
A word—a kiss.

The strange winds sigh above
The bending trees,
And strange and sad days, love,
May follow these.
What care we, darling, now,
Since love is ours,
For winter blasts that rob
The summer flowers?
So that our hearts be one,
So that our love be true,
The world may laugh or frown
For me and you.
Men may be wise or fools,
Stars may die out above;
We ask of life no gift,
But love—but love![1]

He has set the words to music of his own. Music sad and gay and triumphant all in one. Music that finds its way from ear to heart, and fairly carries away the listeners. As he ceases—as the rapturous exclamations of the crowd sound stormily after the long silence—Lauraine looks up and meets Keith Athelstone's eyes.

Only a look!

But looks have broken the fetters of a lifetime's silence before now, and in that moment the secret of two hearts is revealed as clearly and distinctly as if a trumpet-blast had shouted it to their ears.

Their eyes droop. Neither speaks. A moment or two pass on. Then comes a hoarse whisper to Lauraine's ear.

"Come away from this crowd; it is stifling, and that man has spoilt all other singing for to-night."

Without a word she rises and takes his arm. She feels like one in a dream. Senses, feelings—all are lulled to a strange mysterious repose, and now and then her heart thrills with a dreamy rapturous ecstasy.

The memory of that perfect melody is about her still, and follows her out into the shadows of the night, and the dim walks of the quaint old garden. She feels disturbed, perplexed, but almost happy. She has not noticed where he is taking her; only the breath of the cool night air is on her brow, and her eyes, dark and passionate as his own, gaze up at the tranquil lustre of the stars. Under the trees they stand, and face one another at last. He sees only a slender white

[1] These words are copyright.

figure, with the moon shedding its silver rays around it, and two quivering lips that part as if to speak. With a sudden ungovernable impulse he draws her to his breast, and on the trembling mouth spends the pent-up passion of his heart in one long kiss.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR a moment—one mad moment—Lauraine forgets all else save that she loves. Then she snatches herself away from those fierce-clasping arms and starts back, covering her crimson cheeks with her hands, while at her feet the cluster of roses falls, and lies unheeded.

"Oh, Keith!" she sobs, terrified and dismayed.

He recoils as if a blow had struck him. His eyes—*bad* blue eyes, indeed, now—burn with eager light. A thousand mad, wild words rush to his lips, but he does not speak them. He is striving for an instant's self-command. "Forgive me," he says. "I—I forgot. You used to let me kiss you in the old days, you know."

"The old days," she says, and her hands drop, and white and sad she stands before him, looking back at his face with agonized eyes. "I thought you had forgotten them long ago!"

"Since your wedding-day, you mean?" he says bitterly. "No, Lauraine—I do not forget easily, and you are not the sort of woman a man *can* forget. Heaven knows, I tried hard enough. I did everything in my power to drive you out of my head those twelve months after your marriage. A black year that is to look back upon, Lauraine; and you gave it to me."

"Oh, hush!" she says entreatingly; "you have no right to speak like this now, and I have no right to listen."

"No right," he says, and all the rich, full music of his voice has grown hoarse and harsh with strong emotion. "I *have* a right—every right. The right of loving you with the truest, fondest love man ever gave to woman. I never meant to meet you again—

I never sought you; but Fate threw you in my way in Rome, and after all those weary months I—I could not help being glad of it. You—of course it was nothing to you: it never will be—you are so cold; you never cared for me as I for you, and now—oh, God—if you only knew *how* I love you!"

Lauraine shivers from head to foot. It is not his words, his reproaches, that fill her with so strange a dread—it is herself. She knows that she loves him as intensely and as uselessly as he loves her, and that before their two lives now stretches a broad black gulf they cannot cross or evade.

She is quite speechless. The awful ordeal of that wedding-day comes back before her eyes, fresh and vivid as if it had been but yesterday. She knows she has committed a fatal error, but it is too late now to rectify it. Presently Keith speaks again.

"I think you have spoilt my whole life," he says. "Thought drives me mad, or to distractions that are ruinous to body and soul. I feel as if I cannot bear to live as I do. Why," he continues passionately, "do you know, I never stand alone on a moonlight night, or look at any beauty in nature or in art, or see the stars shining in the sky, but I long and long till longing drives me desperate for just your presence beside me, your voice on my ear. I never hear a strain of music that touches my soul but I long to turn to you for answering sympathy. I am young and rich, and have life and the world before me, and yet there is no single thing I can enjoy with any real heart-whole enjoyment now. There is always the one want that drives me desperate—the one craving for *you!*"

Lauraine listens to the torrent of his words, and all her soul seems rent and shaken. In the old days, the old boy and girl days together, she had never loved Keith Athelstone as she loves him now, and that thought terrifies her with a sense of her own wickedness and an awful dread of the ordeal before her.

"I am sorry—so sorry," she says tremulously. "I did hope you had got over it—had forgotten——"

"Forgotten!" interrupts Keith bitterly. "No; I leave that for women."

"Do you think I forgot?" she cries, flashing round upon him with sudden, tempestuous anger. "I did not. My marriage was in a way forced upon me by my mother. You knew it, then. Why do you say such things to me now? Am I not wretched enough?"

Her voice breaks into a faint sob, and all his heart melts at a sign of grief from her.

"Are you wretched?" he says softly. "Oh, my poor darling, not half so wretched as I. When you gave yourself away from me you little knew what you did. I think I have never known one happy moment since—nor ever shall again."

"Why do you tell me this? Is it any use?" falters Lauraine.

"I don't know," he says wearily. "I thought, perhaps, you might pity me—be a little sorry for your work."

"Oh, don't talk like that," she entreats, lifting two soft tear-wet eyes to the young, haggard, reproachful face before her. "Pity you—do you think I am a stone; that I have no feeling?"

"Then you *are* sorry—a little sorry," he says, coming nearer. "Well, that is some consolation. But I can't live on that. I want something more. I don't care how badly you think of me, Lauraine. After to-night I suppose I have just done for myself, but I *will* hear you say what your eyes told me a little while ago—say you love me."

His arms are wrapped around the slender, trembling figure—he holds her closely to his breast and looks down, down, into her eyes with all the fire and passion of his impulsive nature burning in his own. As she meets that look the blood flies like flame through her veins. She feels escape is impossible.

"Don't ask me," she whispers faintly.

His look never changes. "Answer me," he says.

Her eyes sink before that gaze, and all the lustre of the summer night seems to sway and reel amidst the leafy shadows.

"Yes—I love you," she says, with sudden desperation. "It is no new thing to tell you—Heaven forgive me for saying it! Is my shame complete—is there any other confession you wish to force from me?"

His arms release her as suddenly as they had clasped her. "No," he says. "Do not speak so bitterly. I am a brute, I know; but I was always a bad fellow, according to your mother. After all, it is a poor satisfaction to know we are both in the same boat. It makes my pain no less to know you share it. Well, I suppose I have about done for myself now. I may go galloping to the downward road as fast as I like. I have insulted you, and I have made an utter fool of myself. I'd give a great deal not to have done it, but it's too late to say that now. Will you ever forgive me, Lorry?"

The old pet-name of their childish days slips out unconsciously. It moves Lauraine almost to tears. How sad, how changed, how unutterably dreary is life now! "I have little to forgive," she says unsteadily. "I share your fault. Only—only——"

"Hush!" he says, with sudden fierceness. "I know what you are going to say. My folly has shut me out from the only happiness I have. How cruel a *good* woman can be."

"It is not cruelty—it is safety," murmurs Lauraine, with faltering voice. "How can we meet and face each other in the world knowing what we know? Friendship between us is impossible—you have made it so—and there can be—nothing more."

"I would rather *die* than lose you," says Keith passionately. "If you were happy it would be different; but you are not, and your husband is a blackguard, and half London knows it—even your precious mother. It was bad enough to stand aside

and see you sold to him, as you were; but it was nothing to what it is now—now, when I know you are not even happy. Oh, Lauraine, God knows I would have made you *that*, if it lay in any mortal's power!"

The hot colour comes into the beautiful, pale face on which his eyes are fixed. She holds out her hands entreatingly.

"Say no more—it can do no good. Whatever his faults are, I am his wife. Nothing can alter that!"

"Something can," is trembling on Keith's lips, but he does not utter it. Lauraine is not a woman to be trifled with, and he dares not breathe a word that would insult her dignity. All that is boiling in his heart he dares not even think. He knows the purity of her soul and life, and from that pedestal he cannot drag her down to listen to the baser temptings that he might have whispered to another woman.

For a moment they stand silently there. At last Keith speaks. "I never meant to say such words to you again. I don't know what drove me mad to-night. The music, and that song, and your look combined. Oh! Lauraine, you can't love as I do, or you would not scruple to take happiness while it lay in your power. Life is so short, except for those who are miserable, and in all our lives we shall only drag on a wretched half-and-half existence. I know you are the one woman in the world for me, and I have lost you."

"You may forget—in—time," falters Lauraine, her lips growing white at the pain of that thought, her whole soul wrung with the unutterable anguish of this coming parting. "You are very young, Keith, and have the world before you."

"The world is not you," he answers, looking down from his tall height on the pale, sad face he loves so madly. "It is all nothingness and emptiness to me now. But you won't be too cruel to me, Lorry—you won't visit the sins of this evening too hardly on my head. Don't tell me we are never to meet or see each other.

I can't live without a sight of you sometimes, and if you will only say you forgive me I promise not to offend in the same way again. I have kept silence all these months—I can do it again, and——"

"Oh, Keith, don't tempt me like this," she entreats sorrowfully. "You know—you must know—that if we love each other we cannot be 'only' friends. It is not safe for either of us."

"I shall not run away from you as if I were afraid," he says doggedly. "I do not care to live a day if I don't see you. Can't you trust me? can't you believe my word? To-night shall be buried and forgotten, unless—well, unless some happier fate awaits us in the future. We can be as we were, surely. There is no harm in that?"

No harm in that?

Lauraine echoes the words in her heart. No harm—and with the memory of this scene in both their hearts, the thought of that passionate embrace, thrilling every pulse, the rapture of one mad moment ever at hand to repeat its tempting. No harm in it!

A spasm of pain crosses her face.

"Your own sense, your own feelings, ought to tell you that such a course is full of harm," she says faintly. "But, of course, I have no power to banish you. You accuse me of blighting your life, and I deserve the reproach. I should have been firmer—truer; but I did not think your love was so faithful, and in one weak moment I yielded to my mother's persuasions. The harm is done past all undoing, and—and now you wish to increase my unhappiness."

"I wish to be nearer to you—to see you sometimes; that is all. Is it a great deal to ask, considering what I have suffered at your hands?"

Lauraine knows it is only paltering with temptation—only leaping up fresh misery for herself and him in time to come, but still she hesitates; she is only a woman, and she loves.

Alas! that instant's hesitation undoes all the better resolves she has been striving to make. A window is thrown open—voices sound—there comes an echo of footsteps—they are alone no longer.

Keith bends over her impulsively. "Say one word, Lauraine—only one. Say 'stay!'"

She draws her breath sharp and quick—his hand is on her own—she feels its strong, warm pressure, and all her good resolutions fly away. Nothing seems in her heart but one aching, passionate longing for his presence—his voice. Her face pales to the whiteness of death, but to his ear steals the word he has asked for—a whisper that seals their fate to-night—a whisper for which the future holds its own Nemesis of dread and of despair.

"*Stay!*" she says, and they pass out of the silver radiance of the night as they entered it—together.

CHAPTER IX

KEITH ATHELSTONE goes home that night to his rooms, and feels in his heart that he has been a coward.

He knows he has had no right to wring from a woman's weakness such a concession as that which he has won from Lauraine. She is not of the stuff that heroines are made of, and truly there is no "heroic" element about himself. It is a great mistake to fancy people are either very good or very bad in this world of ours. Only too often there is simply a mixture of both in their characters, and circumstances or strength of feeling alternately throw their weight into the balance.

But alone to-night with his own thoughts, and with the fever-pulse of passion dying slowly back into its natural beat, Keith remembers what has passed, and has the grace to feel a little ashamed of it, even though he declares to himself over and over again that he would act in just the same way under similar circumstances.

It is always hard for a second person to judge of our

actions. No one can understand those secret springs—that inner mechanism which moves us to do certain things by certain impulses. That one mad moment had been to Keith Athelstone as the turning-point of his life. A fiery temptation had to be withstood, or yielded to. He had chosen to do the latter.

With his hot-blooded, impetuous temperament—with the knowledge in his heart that he loved this woman beyond and above all others in the world, beyond all possibility of forgetfulness—he knew also that such a thing as mere cold, prosaic friendship was an utter impossibility. At some moment like to-night, when senses and heart thrilled with answering rapture, when passion ran riot in his veins, when the aching and longing of his life spoke one impetuous desire and hurled aside all scruples, as the strength of Samson rent asunder the withes that bound his mighty limbs—at some such moment as this, forms and ceremonies, right and wrong, all would be again forgotten, and those words of Lauraine's would be verified when she said "there can be no safety in such a compact."

He paces to and fro his rooms—the rooms Lauraine's judgment and choice has selected and furnished—luxurious apartments that look out on St. James's Park.

The radiance of the early summer dawn—beautiful even in a great city—is over all the sky. A faint breeze rustles the trees—the birds sing and chirp among boughs that are moist with the night's rain, just some tender freshening shower that had fallen scarce an hour before.

Those young tired eyes of Keith Athelstone's look out on it all, and a sigh parts his lips.

"There are so many women in the world," he mutters, as he ceases his restless pacing, and leans against the open window. "So many that are beautiful and young, and easy to win, and yet all my life is but a longing for one who can be nothing to me. How hard fate is!"

The cool, fresh air blows over his brow, but it does not still its aching. His whole soul is hardened, and bitterly

ashamed. He has gained his will, he has forced Lauraine to say "*Stay*," but all the same his triumph brings no satisfaction. That she loves him he knows, but she is not a woman to lend herself to the base frailties of a lax morality, to sink to the low level that pursues its joys in secret, and smiles serenely on the face of society at large. There would be no playing at innocence with her, and she was too proud as well as too passionate not to suffer intensely in the struggle. And then, after all, how would it end—how do these poor pretences ever end? The barrier is so frail—a look, a word, a chance meeting, and it is overthrown, and then——

He springs impetuously to his feet here. He dares not pursue that train of thought any further.

"I won't think of the end," he mutters. "I shall see her still, and sufficient unto the day is the—evil—thereof!'

The evil?

Might it come to that for Lauraine, and for himself!

"My dear," says Lady Etwynde to Lauraine, as she sits in the boudoir of the latter, "your roses looked charming; there was something so simple and artistic in that arrangement; not like a regular florist's bouquet. But why did you leave them in the garden? I found them lying on the grass when I walked there this morning, and as I love roses, though they have not the subtle meaning of our own peculiar flowers, I brought them in and put them in water."

Lauraine flushes hotly, and then grows as suddenly pale.

"I—I dropped them, I suppose," she says, bending over some crewels she is sorting. "It is of no consequence. I get so many flowers."

Lady Etwynde glances quickly at the beautiful, troubled face. She has taken a warm liking to Lauraine, and when alone with her drops all her fantastic ways and conversation. She leans back now in her low chair, and looks long and thoughtfully at her friend.

"I had not much time to speak to you last night,"

she says presently; "and you left so suddenly. I was afraid you were ill."

"Oh no—I was only tired," answers Lauraine. "How charming your evening was. I rarely hear such music as at your house."

"Yes; Signor Alfieri was delightful," agrees Lady Etwynde. "Did you like his new song, by the way?"

"Do you mean the English one?" asks Lauraine, feeling an odd little thrill at her heart as she remembers the passionate melody which had so moved and stirred her. "It was perfectly exquisite."

"I wrote him the words," says Lady Etwynde calmly.

"*You!*" exclaims Lauraine, in surprise.

"Not that I believe in such sentiments," continues her friend, smiling. "For the matter of that, I suppose no poet is quite idiot enough to believe what he writes, unless they are things like the 'Boudoir Ballads.' But it sounds well to talk of love being all in all, though no one believes it is—or, indeed, wants it to be. Moonlight and kisses are all very well, but we want some more substantial food in life than that."

"You don't believe in love, then?" questions Lauraine.

"Not much. I have outlived that faith. Most women do. At sixteen, you know, we believe in all men; at twenty in *one*; at thirty in none. I believe in none. I have given myself up to the pleasures of the mind, and they suit me much better. I am a disciple of culture."

"I know," smiles Lauraine. "But you might find a kindred spirit even there. What then?"

"Well, I have not much fear of that," says Lady Etwynde gravely. "You see, the men I meet and associate with are more or less hobby-riders. They each have a special subject, and devote themselves to it—almost too much so, in fact. But I suppose it is difficult to draw the line. A fair and adequate amount of culture is delightful, but it leads people on to wild lengths sometimes. I am wondering in my own mind how far the desire for its acquisition will lead me. Still, one must

have some object in life—especially if one is a woman and not married ; and I shall never be *that.*"

"Why is it so improbable ? " asks Lauraine.

"Why ? Oh, because I don't care for such a prosaic termination to my liberty for one thing, and I don't believe in men for another. And society—society as it is now—has really very little interest for me. It bores me, in point of fact. All the same, my dear, the men I meet and whose society I cultivate are not at all the sort of men to inspire romantic sentiments—do you think so ? "

"Candidly, I do not," smiles Lauraine.

"And as a woman—however hard she strives to cultivate her mental power—must also have some outlet for the weaker and more sentimental portion of her nature, I take refuge in writing poetry. It is very safe, and does no one either good or harm, which is more than we can say of some of our modern poets. I have never shaped my actions by what people think or believe, and I am not going to begin now. I am called eccentric, but I would rather be that than commonplace. You, now, are very different. You are full to the brim with romance, and you still believe in 'moonlight and kisses.' Unfortunately, I can't preach a mission to you, for you are married ; and as for art and culture, well, your position demands incessant sacrifices, and the higher good must suffer. Perhaps, after all, it is best to live for the life about one, not some abstract thing that only has interest for a few. The one owns a wider range of sympathy, and has at least the advantage of being understood."

"I think no amount of learning or mental culture —to use your favourite expression—should destroy one's sympathy with the common joys, and needs, and sorrows around us," says Lauraine thoughtfully. "Life has to be lived ; we can't get over that fact, and to shut ourselves apart in the selfish absorption of one special idea, and sneer at all who cannot understand or cannot pause to investigate it, is really a sort of sin against ourselves and our fellow-beings."

"Do you mean that I do that?" asks Lady Etwynde.

"Oh, no; you have plenty of sympathy even for those outside the pale of 'culture.' But a great many of those who surround and flatter you at your aesthetic court are the most prejudiced and narrow-minded individuals it has ever been my lot to meet."

"Ah," sighs Lady Etwynde. "I suppose you are right—it is a case of 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' I often wonder whether it is best to take life very seriously, or laugh at it as a good joke."

"I should think our own natures could alone make either case possible," says Lauraine.

"But the greatest mistake is to put your heart into it," continues Lady Etwynde. "It is like giving a licence to your friends and enemies alike. The purely selfish people are the only class who get any real enjoyment out of life, after all."

"It can scarcely be enjoyment," says Lauraine. "A life apart from love—from sympathy—from the interests of others—can never be an entirely happy one, though it may be in a sense untroubled."

"We are having a very grave conversation for a morning call," says Lady Etwynde; "and it all came about the flowers. Was that your own idea, my love?"

"No—Keith—Mr. Athelstone suggested it," Lauraine answers, with again that burning blush on her delicate cheek.

"You and he are very good friends, I suppose," remarks Lady Etwynde, rising to make her adieux. "But all the same, my dear, I should suggest to him to get married. A rich young man knocking about town is sure to get into mischief. Yes, he'd be much better off married, and there's that pretty American girl—whatever her name is; you know her, don't you?—well, absolutely dying for love of him."

"Indeed?" says Lauraine coldly; "I should scarcely think she was the sort of girl he would admire."

"I never said he admired her. Only I suppose there

was something or other between them in New York. At least they met there, and her aunt is so awfully thick with him."

"He has never mentioned her name to me," answers Lauraine, wondering why that sudden, sharp pain is at her heart—why the bare idea of Keith Athelstone's marriage should be so hateful.

"Ah!—well, I suppose there is nothing in it but talk," says Lady Etwynde. "You and he are just like brother and sister. He would be sure to have told you."

Brother and sister! A hot, shamed flush creeps to Lauraine's brow, and spreads itself over her face and down to the milk-white throat. Brother and sister!—and on her lips still burns, and in her heart still lives the memory of that kiss of last night.

Lady Etwynde goes, and Lauraine sits there alone, and thinks with shame and terror of what she has weakly yielded—permission for his visits, his presence, his old accustomed privileges that the world deems so natural—that she knows to be so wrong now. At the bottom of her heart lies a bitter contempt of herself and her folly—it stings her to hot anger with him—to a haunting dread that will ever pursue her. And yet . . . and yet . . .

CHAPTER X

"My dear Lauraine," says Mrs. Douglas, on one of those rare occasions when she is at Lauraine's house, "isn't it rather bad form to have Keith dangling after you so much? Of course every one knows you are just like brother and sister, and Sir Francis is so kind to him and all that—still, people will talk, you know, and really nowadays a woman can't be too careful. Society is terribly scandalous."

Mrs. Douglas has made one of a dinner party at the Vavasours', and is at present sitting by her daughter's side in the great flower-scented drawing-room.

Lauraine quietly waves the great white fan of feathers

in her hand to and fro, and looks coldly down at her mother's face.

"Who has been good enough to discuss my affairs with you?" she asks, scornfully.

"Pray don't be offended," says Mrs. Douglas, timidly. "People will talk, you know, and really Keith's adoration is very obvious. He never even seems to see there is another woman in the room when you are by. It really is not fair to you. Why doesn't he marry that Yankee girl who is always running after him? It would be the best thing he could do."

"I will ask him if you wish," says Lauraine; "or perhaps it might be better if you put the question yourself."

Mrs. Douglas feels decidedly uncomfortable. "I am only speaking for your good," she says. "For your child's sake you ought to be careful. Of course, Society is very lax, and women can do things nowadays that in my youth would have been thought disreputable. Still, you make yourself quite too remarkable about Keith. It is far better to have twenty men dangling after you than one."

A hot flush burns on Lauraine's cheeks. "I decline to discuss my affairs with any one," she says, coldly. "I am perfectly well able to take care of myself."

"Ah, people always *think* that," says Mrs. Douglas, fanning herself leisurely. "Of course you are your own mistress now, and can do as you please. I simply give you a hint. People will talk, you know."

Lauraine's heart beat quickly, stormily, beneath its shrouding laces. A new trouble seems dawning for her, and yet it but rouses in her heart a fierce desire to brave the world—to laugh to scorn its whispers. Is she not strong? Has she not honour—courage—fidelity?

"I will not affect to misunderstand you," she says at last, looking calmly into her mother's face as she speaks. "You think Keith might forget—or I? But you might know us better than that. We are not likely to scandalize Society—be at rest on that point. Is it not

possible for a woman and a man to care for each other without love, and without—shame ? "

" Possible ?—that *may* be," said Mrs. Douglas. " But probable—I think not. I don't believe in Platonics when a man is under sixty and a woman not forty-five. Nor does the world. Take my advice, dear—there is safety in numbers—don't think only of the attractions of *one*."

" I am not the sort of woman to make many friends, Lauraine answers, tranquilly. " And the few I really like are more to me than the whole crowd of others. But your warning was quite unnecessary, mother, and I think *you* had very little right to utter it."

She rises from her seat as she speaks and goes towards the other end of the room, where the Lady Jean sits radiant and entertaining, being one of the few wise women who take as much pains to conciliate their own sex, as to charm the other.

Mrs. Douglas looks after her uneasily. " I have done no good," she thinks. " Perhaps only harm. But, after all, she is warned, and really it is quite too ridiculous to think he can hang about her for ever. I thought he would have had more sense. And she has been married two years—he ought to have forgotten by this time. As for Lauraine herself, she was always so romantic, I don't blame her so much ; but Keith—and what on earth can she see in him except that he has long eyelashes ? I always thought him quite stupid myself, and Lauraine has mind enough of her own to like cleverness in other people. But I do hope she won't get talked about. It would be altogether too dreadful. There is Lady Jean, now—— "

Her reflections are cut short here—a robe of amber silk seems to float past like a pale gold cloud, and disperse itself over the low chair and Ambusson carpet by her side. Emerging pale and languid from amidst the cloudy draperies is the face of the Lady Etwynde. Mrs. Douglas greets her eagerly. It is rarely indeed that

conventional gatherings like the present are graced by the presence of the lovely aesthete.

"Yes; I make an exception in favour of Lady Vavasour," she says, in her soft, plaintive voice, that seems to rebel against the very burden of speech. "But Society is not congenial to me. My tastes and inclinations move in a very different groove. Why *will* people be frivolous? Life is not meant for eating and drinking and scandalmongering. What can it really matter who is dressed by Worth, or Pingat, or Elise; or whose husband ran off with an actress, or whose wife got talked about at Hurlingham, or anything else of the same sort? Yet this is all one hears discussed in Society. Ah, when a perfect culture has given us a perfect understanding of the beautiful, we shall also have a truer morality. The soul will soar far above the senses, and we shall look back in wonder at the ignorance we once enjoyed."

"No doubt," murmurs Mrs. Douglas, vaguely. She is quite unable to comprehend what Lady Etwynde means, but it would never do to let her perceive it.

"We shall be translated—advanced, as it were," continues Lady Etwynde, dreamily. "We shan't tie back our gowns, and impede the action of our limbs. We shan't cramp our bodies into the machinery of bones and wires, that gives us that most odious of modern inventions—a 'waist.' We shall languish no longer for happiness and occupation. Our minds will soar into purer ether. Ah! happy days that I see in the dim future, and yearn for in the mists of present darkness."

"Exactly," again asserts Mrs. Douglas, in increasing bewilderment. "But don't you think 'waists' are very much admired?" She possesses a very elegant figure of her own, and has her corsets made by a special French artist. It therefore brings no thrill of blissful expectation to her that advanced civilization preludes such an abolition as "stays."

"Admired!" murmurs the Lady Etwynde, dreamily.

"By the Philistines—yes; by the thoughtful—the advanced—the intense—oh, no!"

"The Philistines!" says Mrs. Douglas, in growing bewilderment. "I—I thought corsets were not introduced till the time of Queen Elizabeth."

The Lady Etwynde smiles sadly. "You do not understand—it is merely a technical term for those outside the pale. Progress and culture mean enlightenment—we all need to be enlightened. Our individual tendencies are hampered by social restrictions. But the soul will find its wings and soar above such paltry barriers. Women will take their place in the ranks of the advanced, and the mockers at progress will have to recognize its truth, and feel that it is a law powerful enough to sway the whole machinery of civilization, and lift it upwards to a grander and loftier life."

"Good Heavens! what a dreadful woman," thinks Mrs. Douglas. "I—I have not thought much of such things," she says aloud. "I am not a clever woman, like yourself, dear Lady Etwynde. But I really think we are very happy as we are. What good can progress do?"

"Ah!" sighs Lady Etwynde. "The old cry of the world—the battle-cry of the human race, that is ever so obstinately opposed to its own good. When we cease to oppose, and investigate instead—when prejudice and obstinacy give way to thoughtfulness and consideration, then some proper basis will have been obtained on which to establish the glories of Progress, and the sublimity of Culture."

Mrs. Douglas feels too hopelessly bewildered after this speech to pursue the subject. She gives a sigh, and resigns herself to incomprehensibility; but the entrance of the gentlemen makes a slight disturbance, and the Lady Etwynde lapses into thought. Unknown to each other, both of them are watching the same man—the tall, well-knit figure of Keith Athelstone. He stands a little apart from the group; his face is very grave and very pale. There are dark shadows like a bruise under

his eyes, and the drooped lids hide their expression. Perhaps it is as well. They are eyes more given to reveal than to conceal. The other men draw nearer to the dazzling groups of silk and satin and lace. Some one goes to the piano, and begins to play. Through the open window a faint breeze steals, and, weighted with perfume, floats through the soft-lighted rooms.

"He only looks at *her*," sighs Lady Etwynde.

"Why doesn't the silly boy go and talk to some of those women?" Mrs. Douglas says to herself angrily. "Does he really care for her still? How absurd! And how ill he looks—as if he hadn't slept for weeks; but perhaps that's dissipation. He's sure to have his full share of it now."

Meanwhile Keith stands there absorbed and grave. He has not spoken to Lauraine all the evening. He is wondering whether he might seek her now—whether her duties as hostess will permit her to give five minutes to him. But even as he thinks it, he lifts his eyes, and meets a signal from the gracefully waving fan of the Lady Etwynde. He has no choice but to cross the room and take the seat by her side.

"We have been discussing Progress," she says, with that exquisite smile of hers lighting her face like moonlight as she looks at him. "I was saying women spoil themselves by their dress nowadays. It is too elaborate—too overdone. Lauraine is one of the few women who can dress perfectly. But then she has taste and artistic feeling."

"It is not every one who could dare to copy the Lady Etwynde," Keith says, with an admiring glance at the amber clouds that seem to float round the graceful figure of his companion. "And to one who dresses as she does, all other women must look only 'clothed.'"

"A distinction with a difference," says Lady Etwynde. "You pay compliments very gracefully. That is a rare thing nowadays."

"You are very good to flatter me," answers Keith.

"What I said was scarcely a compliment. How handsome Lady Jean Salomans looks to-night!"

"Yes," answers his companion, giving a rapid glance from under her languid lids in the direction indicated.

Lady Jean is sitting on an ottoman, with a maze of hothouse blossoms as a background for her brilliant beauty, and wears a dress of corn-coloured satin, with scarlet poppies gleaming here and there. Sir Francis is standing beside her, and looking down with unmistakable admiration at the animated face and brilliant eyes.

Involuntarily Keith's glance turns from her to Lauraine. What a contrast!

"Like a sunflower and a lily," murmurs the Lady Etwynde, following that glance and comprehending it.

"Yes," he says, quietly. "They are very unlike. One would scarcely expect the same man to admire both."

"Sir Francis has been more than two years married,' says Lady Etwynde, musingly. "Time enough, I suppose, to admire other people besides his own wife. Why *will* women marry? It is such a mistake!"

"Why will they marry the wrong man, is more to the point," Keith mutters under his thick moustache. "Heavens, what ill-assorted matches one does see!"

"True," replies "the Ladye." "Scarcely made in heaven, I suppose you think?"

"In a very different place, it is my candid opinion."

Mrs. Douglas has risen ere this and moved away. She is never comfortable in Keith Athelstone's presence, and is only too thankful when she can evade him.

"Yes," says Lady Etwynde. "It is sad, but true, that much of the unhappiness of life is caused volun tarily—the proofs of our own unwisdom. Of course, results are always unforeseen. We only grope in the dark. But, for my part, I have never heard of people acting for what they term 'the best' without dire misfortunes following."

Keith's eyes seem to travel down the long rooms to where one shimmering white robe trails in fleecy folds.

His heart aches bitterly as he thinks of what " acting for the best " has brought upon two lives that might have been so happy now.

" Oh, the little more, and how much it is, and the little less—and what worlds away ! "

He talks on with Lady Etwynde in desultory fashion. He knows he need not exert himself to be entertaining here. She likes a good listener—one who can be interested in her ideas and follow them, and with Keith Athelstone, as with Lauraine, she lays her art jargon aside. Yet in his heart he longs for one sound of Lauraine's voice—for just five minutes by her side.

They have not met since the scene in Lady Etwynde's garden, and to-night her greeting has been of the coldest description. But he dares not go over to her now, as he would have done a few days ago. He sits there, contenting himself with an occasional glance, and listening patiently, if a little wearily, to the beautiful aesthete's discussion. Then Lauraine looks across at him and smiles. His heart seems to warm beneath that sign of remembrance—his whole face changes. Lady Etwynde notices it, and grows troubled.

" He is in love, and he does not conceal it—poor boy," she thinks, compassionately. " Ah, I always thought those fraternal arrangements were a great imposition. One or other is sure to ask or desire that ' little more ' which just makes all the difference. Ah ! it is worlds enough away from these two. Does she know, I wonder ? I think not. She could not act that serenity and indifference. She is too transparent. Oh, I hope she does not suspect. It would be terrible indeed. She is so young and beautiful, but she is not happy. Any one can see that ; and her husband is always running after that brazen woman over there. Dear me, how sad life is. Full of contradictions—of pain. Mr. Athelstone," she adds aloud, " I want to speak to that gentleman over there. He is a *savant* of the most advanced school. Kindly give me your arm."

Keith rises and obeys, and comes now within the radiance of the floating white draperies that have been before his eyes the whole night long.

CHAPTER XI

LAURAINE is talking to an elderly man—a colonel in the Guards. She neither looks up, nor moves, but she is perfectly, painfully conscious that Keith is standing by her side. She knows that he has crossed the room, and left Lady Etwynde with her *savant*, and all the time she has not lifted an eyelid, or stirred from that listening attitude. Keith stands there patiently. He has the happy knack of looking always graceful, and to-night he looks handsomer than ever, despite the pallor of his face, the dark shadows under his eyes. The Colonel talks on, and Lauraine answers animatedly.

Keith wonders if any memory is at work within her heart—if her light words and smiles are real or acted.

There is a little stir at the other end of the room. Some one is going to recite—a French count, who is a friend of Sir Francis'. The elderly colonel is a little deaf. He murmurs an apology, and moves down the long suite of rooms. Keith comes quietly forward, and drops into the vacant chair. For the first time Lauraine looks at him. With one rapid, comprehensive glance, she takes in the change in his face—the dark shadows under those heavy lashes, the weariness upon the brow, the stern sadness of the mouth. Pity, sympathy, grief—all well up in her heart and speak in her glance, but her lips are schooled to rigid silence. She dares not seem to notice these signs of suffering.

"If he would only leave me—if he would only be wise!" she thinks, with a sudden passionate dread. "I could bear that, but to go on like this is madness."

He speaks at last. "London grows unbearably hot. I suppose you will soon be leaving?" he says.

"Yes," answers Lauraine, unconcernedly. "Sir Francis talks of going yachting."

"And you accompany him?"

"I? Oh, no—I hate the sea. I shall go to Falcon's Chase. I long for a little quiet and rest. I never cared much for fashionable life, you know."

"Does Sir Francis make up a large party?"

"I believe so. The Salomans, I know, are going; and Marc Vandeleur, his great friend; and the Chesters, and one or two boating men."

"The Salomans?" questions Keith, a note of surprise in his voice. "Oh, they go, do they?"

"Why not?" asks Lauraine, looking at him in wonder. "They are very fond of the sea—at least, Lady Jean is."

"So I suppose," he says in the same peculiar way, marvelling if Lauraine is really the only woman in London Society who does not—know?

But Lauraine asks the question in perfect good faith. She does not like Lady Jean, but she knows no harm of her. She detests scandal so utterly that she never listens to boudoir gossip and five o'clock tea talk, if she can possibly help it. To her Lady Jean is simply a fascinating woman of the world—very handsome, very brilliant, very much admired; a little *risquée*, perhaps, but on good terms with the most exclusive of great "sets," and received everywhere. That her husband should admire her, and show his preference openly, in no way disturbs her. To be jealous one must love passionately, and Lauraine has never loved her husband at all.

"Why do you speak like that?" she asks him suddenly. "Don't you like Lady Jean?"

"Like her? I have scarcely the honour to know her at all," answers Keith. "But if you wish to know the truth, I am unfortunate enough to have formed a prejudice against her. She gives me the idea of being false. I should not like you to make a friend of her."

"A friend!" exclaims Lauraine, quickly. "I should never think of doing that. I am not the sort of woman

who can't exist without a confidant—some one to 'gush' to and consult, and be constantly with. But Lady Jean is very charming, and has been very kind to me, and Sir Francis wished me to show her every attention."

A little hard smile comes to Keith Athelstone's lips. "You are very obedient," he says.

Lauraine colours, and is silent. Meanwhile, at the further end of the room, with her yellow skirts and blood-red poppies gleaming in the lamplight, Lady Jean and Sir Francis Vavasour are talking confidentially together.

"Why must he come?" asks Sir Francis, drawing his dark brows together in a heavy frown. "You could manage it if you wished."

"Manage it?" re-echoes Lady Jean. "*Cher ami*, what can't a woman manage when she wishes? But I *don't* wish to manage it. I don't care to be talked about as we should be. Of course Jo would do anything I wished, but I know what's best, and mean to stick to my first resolution."

Mr. Salomans rejoices in the name of "Joel," but his wife has long ago decreed that it shall not be used by her lips, and "Jo" he always is and always will be.

"You will spoil all the pleasure of the trip for me," murmurs Sir Francis.

"Chut!" she says, contemptuously; "don't be foolish. You can grow sentimental on the waters of the Mediterranean while you think of your absent wife."

"My wife," mutters Sir Francis, following the rapid gesture of the fan. "Oh, there's that young fool again. I wonder he isn't tired of her; she's insufferably stupid."

"Most good women are," agrees Lady Jean; "but they have one incomparable advantage—they are so *safe*. You can always get amusement, you know, from other men's wives—it is a consolation to think the 'other' men can't get it from yours."

Sir Francis feels a little twinge. He knows perfectly well what she wishes to convey, but he has an obstinate conviction that Keith's attentions to his wife

are nothing to her, that whatever *tendresse* there is, lies on the side of the young man. Lauraine is cold and calm and uninteresting—he has made up his mind to those facts. Lady Jean has not yet been able to stimulate his tired passion for his wife into emitting one spark of jealous fire. He has tired of her, but he has great trust in her. He never fears that a breath of scandal will hover about her, and to all Lady Jean's hints he turns a deaf ear—as yet.

"I often wonder what made you marry," says Lady Jean, under cover of the music that has followed the recitation; "and she seems so unlike the sort of woman who would tempt you into such a folly."

"You are right; it was a folly," mutters Sir Francis, moodily. "But I was mad about her at the time, and, after all, one must marry some time or other; it is a necessity when you have property and all that."

"Mad about her!" sneers Lady Jean. "How like a man! You could stop at nothing, of course, but the absolute possession of your fancied toy. And your craze has lasted two years! Admirable fidelity!"

"It would never have been a craze at all," whispers Sir Francis low in her ear, "if you——"

"Hush!" she says, softly; "I have forbidden you to speak of that. It would have been different if we had met—earlier. As it is——"

She ends the sentence with a sigh. It may mean anything, and is poetic; it sounds better than to say, "As you are quite as rich as Joel Salomans, and are of better birth and family, I would have taken you instead." Sir Francis hears only the sigh, and meets a glance from the dark, brilliant eyes.

"As it is you are cruel," he whispers, passionately.

"Cruel to be kind," she says, with a little mocking laugh. "Keep to your pearl of purity, *mon cher*. If you are not a jealous husband, you might surely be a faithful one."

"Have I not told you she bores me?" says Sir

Francis, petulantly. "And I know she detests me, and always did. I did not mind that—once. Now—well, one can't be always at a one-sided adoration."

"Fancy 'adoring' any one! How odd!" laughs Lady Jean. "I thought it was only in novels men did that."

"Have you never loved then?"

Lady Jean raised her arched eyebrows, and looks at him with admirable amusement. "I?—most decidedly not. Should I be without wrinkles at my age, if I had? *Non, merci.* I never believed in such folly, and never perpetrated it."

"Perhaps only because the right teacher was not at hand to give you the lesson," says Sir Francis, audaciously.

"The right teacher," says Lady Jean, with a little mocking laugh. "There is no such teacher for me, my dear Sir Francis. I can defy fate."

"I wish you would tell me how," says Sir Francis. "The recipe might be useful."

"You have had your attack of fever, so you are safe," she answers, laughingly. "No, my recipe is too valuable to be parted with. Now, you have talked to me long enough to-night. Go away and entertain some one else."

"I don't want to talk to any one else," says Sir Francis, doggedly. "Why do you send me away? *You* are not afraid of Mrs. Grundy, surely?"

"Oh no. She and I are the best of friends. Afraid?—well, I don't think I have any need to be afraid. Every one is talked about nowadays—either for what they do or what they don't do. And it is so much easier to say a thing than disprove it. It is just like a lovely complexion—every one can say you paint, but every one can't see you wash your face. Society never believes in the lovely complexion, and yet wouldn't enter a dressing-room if it could, for fear of finding there was nothing but —soap and water—after all!"

"But all this is no reason why I am to go away now," complains Sir Francis, sulkily.

"Can't you trace the anology? I don't want to make

your pretty wife jealous. I don't want people to talk. I—I don't want to give you a monopoly of my company. These are reasons enough, surely."

"Your reasons are admirable—all except the first. Lauraine jealous! You might as well expect the Venus of Milo to come down from its pedestal, and walk through a modern drawing-room."

"Marriage does not seem an attractive *menu* after all, does it?" says Lady Jean, musingly. "Two years, and you have done with the olives and sweetmeats, and come to the plain ungarnished *rôti*. The *rôti* is much more wholesome, though."

"I believe every man who marries comes to the conclusion he has made a d——d mistake."

"And every woman, too," agrees Lady Jean, quickly. "Well, it's not to be wondered at. Difference of feeling makes a wide gulf between two natures; and where do you find two people likely to get on together for a lifetime? Bah—it is impossible! Now go—go—I have talked to you quite enough, and the music is over. I am going to chat with Lady Etwynde. She amuses me, and it is rarely any one does that nowadays."

Sir Francis takes himself off obediently, and the evening goes on as such evenings usually do. There is music and singing and conversation, and the people who get next the people they like, are content enough, and those who are wrongly paired are indescribably bored, and the beautiful hostess moves like a slender white lily among them all, and two blue eyes watch her with an intenser "yearning" than ever the Lady Etwynde or her friends have experienced for the subtle—the infinite—the sublime.

Lauraine is growing very weary of this life she leads. There seems no possible escape from it, and fashion, in its way, is just as fatiguing as the work-room, or the factory, or the office. There are times now when she longs to be away from the roar of noisy streets,

to breathe cool fresh air, to be alone with the peace and loveliness of nature, to have just—*rest.*

There is no such thing to be found here. Every day, almost every hour, has its occupations. The jargon, the laughter, the scandals and frivolities of Society are alike distasteful; but she cannot evade them, be she ever so weary. She stands in the ranks, and must needs move onward in the hot and hurried march.

She is counting the days now before it will all be over—before she can fly to quiet Falcon's Chase, and in her child and her books find companionship more to her taste. She longs for those dark old forest lands, where the noise of the sea echoes always, and everything is grand and noble, and rich with the traditions of past ages. She does not dread solitude, but rather longs for it. All this feverish unrest will be over then. She need have no house party till the autumn, but she is going to take Lady Etwynde with her. There is something harmonious and tranquil about her that will suit the dim old Chase, with its great dusky chambers, and magnificent hall, and oak-panelled galleries. Moving to and fro among her guests, and talking the pretty frothy nothings that Society demands, Lauraine thinks only of this. The longing is taking absolute possession of her, and Keith will not be able to follow her—there.

She feels a dread—almost a dislike to him to-night. The memory of that scene a few days ago fills her with a sense of intolerable shame, and her mother's warning sounds like an added insult.

A sense of irritation—of impatience—of disappointment is heavy at her heart.

"He is not good, or honourable, or he would not stay," she says to herself, as move where she may, the sadness of those eyes, with their watchful entreaty, haunts her. "Why did I let him persuade me to utter that word?"

The guests leave—the great rooms are solitary. Sir Francis goes off to finish the evening somewhere else. Lauraine seats herself wearily by one of the open win-

dows, and looks out at the foliage of the Park—all dry, and sere, and dusty now, with the long drought and heat of summer. She looks and looks, and great tears gather in her eyes and roll slowly down her cheeks. She has everything that the world counts worth having —she is young and beautiful and courted and flattered ; but for all that her heart aches—aches—aches.

" It was impossible then—it is doubly impossible now," she says, wearily. " Sin—shame—misery—whichever way I look at it. Oh, God help me—what am I to do ? "

CHAPTER XII

FALCON'S CHASE is apt to be considered somewhat dreary and dull by those members of the fashionable world who only exist to kill time, and see no beauty in Nature's handiwork.

But to Lauraine the whole place is beautiful beyond words. The great dark forest lands that shelter the deer in their coverts, the old bridle-paths, where the boughs meet overhead, the solemn, stately old mansion itself, shut in by elm-woods and mighty oaks of centenarian growth, the stillness and solitude and repose that breathe everywhere, these have for her an exceeding charm, an ever-varying delight. For days and days she does nothing but wander about, sometimes alone, sometimes with Lady Etwynde.

The weather is mild and the sky is grey and soft. The keen, salt air of the sea braces and refreshes her tired frame, and languid spirits. Her friend is enchanted with the place, and throws aestheticism to the winds and goes about in a neat tailor-made gown of homespun, and abolishes the nimbus around her fair head, and evinces an energy and alertness that would astonish her admirers of the " lilies-and-languor " class.

One closing evening they stand on the summit of the great cliffs, at whose base a wild sea is breaking tempestuously. A wilder sky is above their heads, one that foretells a storm close at hand.

Lauraine turns her face seaward, and the fierce wind and dashing spray seem to give it a new and wonderful beauty. "It is glorious!" she murmurs, as she stands there in a sort of rapture. "It seems as if one could move, breathe, be free in a place like this."

"Free?" says Lady Etwynde. "Is any one that? As long as life shackles our souls, so long does bondage curb our wishes. I never met a single person, man or woman, who could do exactly as they wished."

"Well, you have not much to complain of," laughs Lauraine. "You live as you like, do what you like, go where you like, and have no domestic responsibilities."

"True," says her friend, with sudden gravity, "yet for all that I have felt a pang of envy sometimes when I have seen a poor beggar-woman in the streets press her child to her breast, and look with real love at its poor, pale, wizened face."

"What a confession for a disciple of Culture—one who has educated her eyes and taste to such perfection that a *criante* bit of furniture, a false tone of colour, a mistaken arrangement of draperies, will torture her as a discordant note tortures the ear of a musician! So you haven't outlived feminine weakness yet, my dear?"

"I suppose Nature always exacts her rights from us at some period or another," answers Lady Etwynde. "I have become accustomed to hear I am passionless and cold, and find it less trouble to live up to the character than to deny it. People are always so sure they know us better than we know ourselves. Being a single woman, it is rather a comfort to have such a reputation, and as I dislike men, and patronize fools, I am safe."

"But you are not cold-hearted at all," says Lauraine, turning her face, with its beautiful sea-kissed bloom, to that lovely languid one of her aesthetic friend. "Don't you really care to marry?"

"What should I gain?" asks Lady Etwynde, tranquilly. "*Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*, you know. I am very well off. I can do pretty much—not exactly—

as I please. I have no one to control me, or consult. I can follow my own whims and vagaries. Am I not well enough ? "

" And yet you envied the beggar-woman ? "

" That was in one of those moments when Nature was whispering at my heart. Nothing touches me like a child's sorrow or love. I have often longed to adopt one, but—well, I suppose the *feeling* would not be there ? "

" You might marry for—love," suggests Lauraine.

" My dear," murmurs her friend, with delicate scorn and faint reproach, " at thirty years of age ? "

" That is not old for a beautiful woman," says Lauraine, with unconscious but most sincere flattery. " And it is our natures that make us old, I think, more than actual years."

Lady Etwynde smiles her pensive, moonlit smile.

" I shall never love," she says, calmly. " Men are so uninteresting ; and, besides, people always seem so unhappy when they are married."

Lauraine colours hotly, and her eyes turn seaward.

" Yes," she says in a low voice. " The people we know and meet—in Society. But to them marriage has been chiefly a matter of arrangement, or convenience. There is not often any *heart* in it."

" And if there were it would not last," answers Lady Etwynde. " Sentiment is lovely in theory ; you cannot reduce it to practice, though."

" I think it might be possible," says Lauraine, dreamily. " Even fashion and the world cannot kill feeling. If people would only be more true to themselves—less artificial, less exaggerated—they would be much happier."

" Doubtless ; but far less comfortable ! My dear Lauraine, Society suits its age, and always has suited it. It is no use wishing things could be altered."

" I suppose not," sighs Lauraine.

" You are rather romantic," continues Lady Etwynde, as they turn back from the great bold headland and move towards the narrow path that leads into the

woods of Falcon's Chase. "It is an unfortunate quality for either man or woman. They will never see persons or things as they really are. They will love, and invest the person loved with every attribute they would *wish* them to possess, and which, alas! they never do. They throw a halo of imagination round every head that is dear to them. Their existence is a series of shocks and disappointments. They see their fairy weapons broken time after time in the world's rough warfare. They stand and look at life with wistful, feverish eyes, praying, 'Be as I fancy you,' and it never will. They break their hearts over the sufferings and sorrows they see, and intensify their own by too keen a sympathy. They are never understood, especially by those they love the best. They are like the poets who sing to deaf ears and go through life misunderstood, even if not scorned, and not ridiculed."

"What makes you think I am romantic?"

"A thousand things. Your love of nature and solitude, your artistic fancies, your emotional capacity, your extreme sensitiveness. I have a weakness for studying character. When I first saw you I said to myself: 'She is not happy.' 'She is full of idealities.' 'She cares nothing for the world.' 'She will not be content only to—live.' Am I right, or not?"

"Can one ever know oneself quite?" murmurs Lauraine, colouring softly. "Do you really think I am not—happy?"

"Think! It scarcely needs consideration. But I am not going to encourage you in morbid sentiment. I do not think you are a weak woman. I hope not. But I fancy you will need all your strength at some time in your life."

"You talk like a sibyl. Do you possess the gift of second sight in addition to your other accomplishments?" laughs Lauraine.

"I don't think so. It only needs a little thought, a mental trick of putting two and two together, to read

most characters. Of course there is a great deal of mediocrity to be met with, and yet it is surprising how widely even mediocrities differ when you give yourself the trouble of analysing them. Human nature is like a musical instrument—there are but few notes, seven in all—but look at what volumes of melody have been written on those notes."

"And, to pursue your metaphor, what a difference in the sound of the keys to each individual touch: some give back but a dull thud; others a rich, full, resonant sound, full of life and melody."

"True, and therein lies the danger for many natures. The master-hand that produces the highest order of melody is perhaps too often that of some passing stranger who goes carelessly by—and who, so to speak, finds the instrument open—runs his hands lightly over the keys, awakens brilliance, life, beauty, where others have produced but dull, prosaic sounds, and then goes away and—forgets."

"Ah, if we were only wood and leather, and had wire for our strings, not hearts and souls, we should not miss the player, or sigh for the vanished music," says Lauraine. "Unfortunately, forgetfulness is not always possible for us, desire it as we may."

"Have you ever desired it?" asks Lady Etwynde, quickly. "Pardon me," she adds, as she notices the sudden whiteness of the beautiful face. "I should not have asked. But you will not misjudge me, idle curiosity had nothing to do with the question."

"I know that," says Lauraine, quickly. "Yes, if there is one thing I desire on earth it is the possibility of forgetfulness."

"The one thing that never comes for trying—or seeking—or praying," murmurs Lady Etwynde, dreamily. Alas, those melodies! A sad day indeed it is for the woman who confesses—

> 'The face of all the world is changed, I think,
> Since first I heard the foot-steps of thy soul.'

It is a beautiful idea, is it not? That is one advantage of poetry—it clothes a thought in grace so exquisite that we feel as if conversing with a being from another world. I never can understand people saying they don't like, or can't comprehend it. Sense, memory, love, pleasure, joy, pain, all that is sensitive, emotional, purest, best, is acted upon and intensified by poetry. A word, a line, will thrill us to the very core and centre of our beings—will make joy more sweet—pain less bitter—love more exquisite and life less hard, even beneath its burden of regrets."

"You love poetry so much?" questions Lauraine.

"More than anything. But by poetry I don't mean merely beautiful verses. I include all grand and noble thoughts that imagination has coloured, and that are read as prose. A really poetic nature is one that sees beauty in the simplest of created things as well as in the grandest; that is humble and yet great; that drinks at every fountain of nature; that steeps itself in the enchantment of a scene, not measuring merely the height of a mountain from the sea level, or dwelling on the possible discomfort of a storm at a particular altitude; that knows its mind to be full of longings and yet can only partially satisfy them; that would fain be glorified, filled, enriched; and, alas! knows only too well that the wings of the mind are beating against the prison-bars of a stern and hard existence, from which escape is only possible in dreams, or—death!"

"Do you not think that such a nature must be intensely unhappy?"

"I said so at the beginning of our conversation. But still it holds the two extremes that make up life—happiness and misery; it gets more out of each than natures more placid and commonplace and content. It really lives, and the others—stagnate."

"You must have read a great deal, and thought a great deal," says Lauraine, looking admiringly up at

her friend's thoughtful face. "Do you know I think you are the only woman I have ever met who talks about other things besides dress and fashion? I don't think I ever heard you say a scandalous word of anybody. You put me in mind of something a friend of mine once said, 'Women who are intellectual always talk of *things*; women who are shallow, of *persons*.' There is a great deal in that if you come to think of it. How wearisome it is to hear of nothing but 'names' in a conversation; and yet I know heaps of men and women who are considered brilliant and witty and amusing, and whose whole conversation turns upon nothing else but gossip respecting other men, or women."

'I quite understand you. Society is eminently artificial, and objects to strong emotions, and would rather not be called upon to feel anything. 'Why *will* people go on writing?' said a lady to me one day. 'Everything has been said that can be said. Literature is only repetition.'"

"'My dear madam,' I told her, 'light is always light;' but I suppose you will acknowledge there is a difference between having our streets illuminated with oil-lamps hung on a rope, or brilliant with gas and electricity. Art and science and literature must progress with their age. Scott and Fielding and Smollett don't suit the nineteenth century, any more than perhaps Braddon, Ouida, and Rhoda Broughton may suit the twentieth. Nevertheless, each has had its day and held its champions, irrespective of what a coming generation will say on the subject. The immediate good, excitement, benefit, is all Society thinks of now. It has laid its demands on each respective cycle—birth, or heroism, or refined manners, or even mind. But in our age it worships the golden calf alone. *You* don't know, and I don't; but all our reward is to be wondered at, and never to 'get on' with people. It is Lady Jean Salomans who 'gets on.' But then she knows her

age and accepts it, and goes with it. I dare say, being a clever woman, she laughs in her sleeve at one set, and yawns after a prolonged dose of the other; but she's the most popular woman in London, and there's something in that more satisfactory nowadays than in saying: 'I am the Queen of England.' You and I will never be 'popular' in her sense, Lauraine, because we don't take the trouble, or perhaps appreciate, the reward. As for you, my dear, you are too transparent for Society. You show if you are bored or pleased, or happy or sad. That doesn't do. You should always go about masked, or you are sure to offend some one or other. You are young, and have been very much admired, and have a splendid position. Socially you might take the lead of Lady Jean, but you never will. You don't care enough about the 'honour and glory' of social success."

"No; it seems to me unutterably wearisome."

"Exactly, and you show that you feel it to be so. I have done the same for long, but then I covered my dereliction with the cloak of eccentricity. You simply do nothing but look like a martyr."

"Why will people live and act as if this life was the be-all and end-all of existence, I wonder?" murmurs Lauraine. "Fancy fretting one's soul away in the petty worries of social distinction, the wretched little triumphs of Fashion. To me it seems such an awfully humiliating waste of time."

"You laugh at my enthusiasm for Culture," answers Lady Etwynde; "but that really is the only way to reform the abuses that disfigure an age so advanced and refined as ours. Invention and science have never done so much for any period as for this, and yet men and women shut themselves out from intellectual pleasures, and demand scarce anything but frivolity, excitement, and amusement—not even well-bred amusements either. The gold of the millionaire gilds his vulgarity, and lifts him to the level of princes. Good

birth and refinement, and purity and simplicity, are treated as old-fashioned prejudices. We are all pushing and scrambling in a noisy bewildering race. We don't want to think or to reason, or to be told of our follies in the present, or of retribution in the future. Gilt and gloss is all we ask for, no harsh names for sins, no unpleasant questioning about our actions. Ah me! it is very sad, but it is also very true. Society is a body whose members are all at variance as to the good, and agreed as to the evil. The passions, the absurdities, the interests, the relations of life are either selfishly gratified, or equally selfishly ignored. It is not of the greatest good to the greatest number that a man or woman thinks now; but just the greatest amount of possible gratification to their respective selves. With much that should make this age the most highly-cultured the world has known, there is, alas! much more that renders it hopelessly and vulgarly abased."

"And there is no remedy?"

"My dear, there are many. But Society hugs its disease, and cries out at the physic. It knows of the cancer, but will not hear of the operator's knife. Perhaps, after all, it is right. Think of the trouble of being highly bred, highly educated, pure in thought and tone, sparkling and not vulgar, amusing and yet refined, dignified yet never offending, proud yet never contemptuous. Why, it would be a complete revolution. Fancy forsaking artifice, living in a real Palace of Truth, where everything was honest, definite, straightforward! Think of our poor pretty painted butterflies, forsaking their rose gardens and beaten by the storms and cold winds of stern prejudices and honestly-upheld faiths. Ah, no! It is simply preaching a crusade against infidels, who are all the more vindictive in opposition because civilization, instinct, and reason tell them they are in the wrong. . . Why, here we are almost at the lodge, and here comes baby to meet us. Ah, Lauraine, thank God after all, that we are women. Would a child's

smile and broken prattle be a volume of such exquisite poetry to any other living creature ? "

Two little eager feet are toddling to meet Lauraine, two tiny arms clasp her neck as she runs forward and snatches up the little figure.

A thrill of sweet, pure joy flies through her heart. " Heaven has not left me comfortless," she thinks.

CHAPTER XIII

" I have loved," she said,
" Man is weak—God is dread."

THE child can just run alone now, and lisp his mother's name in that sweet baby language which is earth's exquisite music to a mother's ears. He is a lovely little fellow, with big starry eyes, and soft gold hair and winning coaxing ways, which did as they would with all womankind, who had anything to do with him.

Lauraine kneels there for a moment under the great oak trees, and, holds him clasped to her heart.

" We will take him home, nurse," she says, looking up at the stately personage who is his guardian, and who adores him with all her soul.

" You can't carry him, my lady, and it is too far for him to walk," she says.

" Oh yes. Lady Etwynde and I will carry him between us," answers Lauraine. " Darling—how strong and big he gets ! There, take mother's hand. Isn't he delighted, Lady Etwynde, to come with us ? "

" He seems so," smiles her friend. " Farewell to philosophy now, Lauraine. King Baby puts everything else into the background."

" It is wonderful, is it not ? " says Lauraine, with something of the old bright smile. " I wonder how I could ever have lived without him. He seems to hold all my heart in these two wee hands of his."

" I have often wondered," says Lady Etwynde, dreamily, " it seems an odd thing to say, perhaps, but I have often wondered at women who are mothers ' going

wrong' as people express it. I could understand a wife, bad as it is; but to forsake your children your own flesh and blood for the sake of a man's love—well it must be a sort of delirious frenzy, I suppose. And do you know it is not always flighty women—careless women—who astonish us by a *faux pas*. It is sometimes the quietest and most unlikely."

"Yes," answers Lauraine very quietly; "these cases are so totally different to the lookers-on. They only see the result, not what leads up to it."

"It is difficult to know what to think," says Lady Etwynde. "I have known people marry for love, for money, for rank, for convenience, for obedience's sake, for duty's sake, and yet I don't know of one single *really* happy marriage. The lovers have got sick of each other in a year, the moneyed pair are miserable, the other indifferent, unfaithful, erratic, as the case may be. Is it any wonder, Lauraine, that I gave the business a wide berth?"

"You are fortunate to be able to please yourself," says Lauraine; "it is not every woman who can do that."

"No, I suppose not," says her friend. "And then it's a case of 'what can't be cured, must be endured.' Is baby too heavy for you? Let me carry him now!"

"I wonder what makes him shiver so?" says Lauraine, anxiously. "I don't think nurse ought to have brought him out such a cold afternoon."

"And we haven't a shawl or wrap of any description," says Lady Etwynde. "Yes he does look cold. There, I'll turn his face away from the wind. We shall soon be home. Why, how troubled you look, my dear. When you have a nursery full of little plagues, you won't fidget about *one* so much."

But, despite her cheery words, she hurries on as fast as her feet can carry her. The little fellow shivers constantly during that passage through the avenue, and glad indeed is she when the ruddy blaze of lights and fire gleams from the great dark old mansion.

"He will soon be warm now," she says, cheerfully when they reach the house. Lauraine and herself take off his hat and coat, and sit down with him before the great blazing fire in the hall, and chafe his little cold hands and feet until he crows and laughs, and seems to have quite recovered himself again.

The two women sit there and have tea brought to them, and administer some to baby, who appreciates it immensely. They play games with him, and sing nursery rhymes, and in fact, have an hour of the simplest, and perhaps also the purest enjoyment that women can have. Then nurse comes, and he is carried off to bed, flushed, rosy, boisterous, his pretty laughter echoing down the wide oak staircase, his eyes beaming star-like down on his mother's face so long as ever she remains in sight. When he is fairly gone the two friends ensconce themselves comfortably before the great fireplace.

A footman enters with the post-bag, and hands it to his mistress. Lauraine unlocks it, and takes out its contents. She hands two or three letters to Lady Etwynde, and glances carelessly at her own. One, she sees, is from her husband, the other—a sudden wave of colour crimsons her face. Only too well she knows those bold, clear characters. "Why does he write to me?" she thinks, passionately. "Can't he even try and let me forget?"

Lady Etwynde is absorbed in her own correspondence. Lauraine hastily tears open the envelope and takes out two sheets closely covered. The letter begins without any preamble, or formal mode of address:

"Perhaps I ought not to write to you. You gave me no permission to do so before you left town; but, all the same, I feel I must. It is only a week since you went away. How *long* a week can be! I can't make up my mind where to go. I have heaps of invitations, but don't care to accept any of them. Mrs. Woollffe and her niece are at Scarborough, they go to Trouville afterwards. I may join them. Despite eccentricities, they

suit me better than English people. How is the 'Ladye'? Is she pursuing culture amidst the gloomy grandeur of Northumbrian shores, and does she bore or entertain you? Perhaps it is no use to ask questions, for you have never promised to write. Would you do so, I wonder, if I told you what a great, *great* pleasure it would be to me; and I think you know something of the emptiness of my life. Do not fancy I am complaining, or that I wish to excite your pity. I only leave it to yourself and your own kind-heartedness, I won't even plead the old 'boy and girl' claim now. With you, Lauraine, I have always felt more as if speaking to myself in a way—you have so much comprehension, so much sympathy. You know there are few people to whom we ever open up our *real* selves and most of us go through life really strangers to those who think they know us best. But with you and me this will never be. We have stood heart to heart in our childish days, and known to the full each other's faults, weaknesses, capabilities. How often you used to lecture me on my selfishness, my headstrong will, my impulsiveness. Ah me! how often that sweet little child face of yours looks back at me from the mists of the past. I have only to close my eyes and I see you, oh, so plainly, in your simple cotton frock, and with your great eyes upraised to mine. I can even feel the touch of your little hand on my arm; and your voice—will ever a woman's voice on the face of God's earth thrill my soul and calm my wild heart as yours has done, and does? Oh! the pity of it all; the pity of it. . . .

"My pen is running away with me, my thoughts are no longer under my control. As I sit alone here, I hear a band in the street below playing a sad waltz air, an air that we danced to once, this season that is over. How it brings you back to me. I can see the colour of the dress you wore. I feel the scents of the flowers in your breast; you are floating by my side and your heart beats close to mine. Ah! the music ceases; you are gone?

I am looking out on the evening sky; purple and gold and amethyst, the clouds bordered with a fringe of fire as the sun just sinks away. Perhaps you are looking at the same sky; perhaps your thoughts——. But no, I will not dare to say that. It is so hard, Lorry, oh, so hard, to think that we are not now as we were. Do you think I have grown sentimental? I, who was always so rough and wild and impetuous, and laughed to scorn the milk-and-water of poetry? No. I think you will know what it is that is in me, and with me, and why I feel like this; as the thoughts flow into my mind, my hand traces them just as in those past happy days. I can put into words for you, and you alone, the strange feelings and wild imaginings that no other human being ever suspects me of possessing. This is a long letter. Perhaps you will smile at it. I should not wonder; but, in any case, don't visit its folly on the writer, who is now and always—Yours only,

"KEITH."

In the reddened glow of the fire-blaze Lauraine reads these words. Her eyes grow dark and misty; a strange, soft trouble takes possession of her heart.

"He is quite right," she thinks. "We two stand to each other in quite a different light to what we do to any one else. It was so natural once to speak to each other like this; but, though I thought I knew Keith, I am afraid I did not. I never gave him credit for such depth of feeling. I thought, after that day, he would forget me. And, after all——" A heavy sigh breaks from her lips. She folds the letter together, and puts it in her pocket. Her husband's lies on the table, unopened.

"Sir Francis is a good correspondent," remarks Lady Etwynde. "Is he enjoying his cruise?"

"Sir Francis!" murmurs Lauraine, vaguely. "I—I have not read his letter yet."

"I beg your pardon!" exclaims Lady Etwynde, hastily, and colouring with embarrassment. It has not

occurred to her that that long, bold, manly scrawl could be from any one but Sir Francis. Lauraine takes up the other letter now. No closely covered sheets here. Rather a different missive:

"DEAR LAURAINE,

"Weather beastly; every one out of sorts. Awfully slow, if it wasn't for Lady Jean. Hope you and the boy are all right. Ask some people for next month. The Salomans will come back with me.—Yours,

"FRANCIS VAVASOUR

"PS.—Will write and say what date to expect us."

"Husbands don't trouble to write long letters," remarks Lauraine, folding up this curt epistle. "Sir Francis is going to bring the Salomans here next month. I wonder what on earth Lady Jean will do with herself."

"She will organize all sorts of entertainments, and turn the place upside down," answers Lady Etwynde. "Are you going to have a large party?"

I suppose so. I am sorry for it. I hoped to have a long spell of rest and quiet."

"You will ask your mother, I suppose?"

"My mother?" Lauraine starts and looks uncomfortable. "I—I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"I wonder what is in the background," thinks Lady Etwynde to herself. "She and her mother don't get on; and there is Keith Athelstone. Did she make Lauraine marry Sir Francis? I should have thought the girl had sufficient strength of mind to hold her own against persuasion. Still one never knows."

Alone in her dressing-room before dinner Lauraine reads again that letter of Keith Athelstone's.

"I wonder what I ought to do," she thinks. "Is it dangerous to go on with this? The case looks so different to just 'us two' to what it would, to an outsider. And though I might send him away now, we should be sure to meet again at some period or another. The

world is never wide enough to part those who *ought* to be parted. And the poor fellow is so unhappy. No one understands him as I do. I know in books whenever there is anything of this sort, any danger, the two people always go into heroics, and part nobly, and have fearful sufferings to endure; but then in the third volume everything is sure to come right. If I thought, if I knew there would be a third volume in *our* lives . . . Ah, dear me, when do things ever come right in real life? Never, never, never." With a weary sigh that ends these thoughts she locks the letter away.

Far enough is she from guessing then what will soon put it and the writer out of her thoughts.

Meanwhile the Lady Etwynde is seriously disturbed and perplexed. She is too genuinely fond of Lauraine not to perceive that she has some inward trouble weighing on her mind, and yet she does not ask its nature, or even appear to notice it. She knows the girl is pure-minded, loyal, self-controlled; but so have been other women, who, beneath a sudden tempting—a fierce, wild, incomprehensible passion—have fallen from their high estate. And there is that in and about Lauraine that betrays that she could love very deeply, very passionately, with that absorption of herself into what she loves that is so dangerous a trait in any woman's character. To the weak, the placid, the prosaic, the cold, such a nature as this is quite incomprehensible. To the untempted it is so easy to be strong; to the cold, so easy to be virtuous. The conquest of self seems so possible when you have not to count the cost. To yourself? ah, no, not to *yourself*, but to one other who is all the world to you, and whose pain and sorrow intensify your own till the agony grows too much for human strength to bear.

Lady Etwynde had no personal experience to guide her through this maze of conclusions; but she had an immense amount of sympathy, and an infinite tenderness of nature. It pleased her to veil and deny this to the world at large, but it made her all the more beloved by the

chosen few whom she neither could nor would deceive.

For Lauraine she had conceived a strong liking, not the mere pretty, gushing fancy that stands in lieu of friendship with so many women of the world; but an earnest and appreciative affection that would serve and stand by her all her life. She had a shrewd suspicion that all was not right with her; some care, some secret trouble, was preying on her mind, she felt assured.

"Perhaps, in time, she will tell me," she thinks to herself. "I hope she may. I might help her. Brooding over these things with one's self always makes them worse. What a woman can't talk of is bad for her. It eats into her heart and life, and absorbs all that is best in both. There is a disdain, a weariness about Lauraine unnatural in one so young. She loves her child, that one can see; but apart and aside from him she seems to have no life, no interest. Apathy, indifference, despair; those are not things that should be about her yet; but I know they are. And why?"

The dinner-bell sounds, and puts an end to her reflections, and she goes down the great oak staircase in her floating, artistic draperies, and, despite her beauty and her picturesqueness, actually has the bad taste to murmur "What a comfort there are no men here!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE storm that threatened at sunset fulfils its prediction as night draws on. Lauraine, lying awake in her bed, hears the howling of the wind, the fierce rush and sweep of the rain, the far-off roar of angry waves that dash against the dreary iron-bound cliffs.

Once, suddenly, amid the noise of the elements, she fancies she hears a strange sound from the adjoining room, the room that she has turned into a night nursery, that her child may be as near her as possible. She sits up and listens; but all is still.

Again she lies down, but a restless, troubled feeling is on her. Sleep seems impossible. She rises and puts

on a loose white dressing-robe, and, softly opening the door of communication, steps into the nursery.

A night-light is burning dimly, the fire in the grate throws a fitful blaze around. She moves swiftly to the little lace-curtained cot, and bends over the child.

What is it she hears that blanches her face with terror, that strikes cold and chill to her heart? Her arms are round the little figure; a cry arouses the sleeping woman in her bed beside the little cot. She springs up and sees her mistress, and in an instant is by her side.

Too well she knows the meaning of that hoarse, strange sound. The cold and cruel wind has done its work. In another moment the household is aroused. The stillness of the night is all one tumult of voices and feet. Lady Etwynde, startled by the noise, goes straight to Lauraine's room, and finds it untenanted; but there in the nursery, with a face white with despair, a vague, pitiful terror in the eyes that turn from the little figure in her arms to the pitying faces around, sits the poor young mother. The struggles for breath, the hoarse, horrible cry that once heard is never forgotten, tell Lady Etwynde their own tale.

Some one has taken a horse and gone for a doctor. The usual remedies of hot bath and steam have been applied. They can only wait, wait in that agony of suspense which is the cruellest suffering of life. Weeping, frightened, the little crowd fill the room. The mother alone is dry-eyed and calm. Her voice from time to time wakes the silence with all the fond and tender words the baby ears have grown familiar with. Sometimes a quiver of agony passes over her face as she sees the terrible suffering, as the lovely star-like eyes gaze up at her in a wondering, imploring way, seeming to beseech help and ease from one who loves him so.

The night wears on. The leaden-footed hours drag their way wearily towards the dawn. Slowly the wind dies away in sobbing sighs; slowly the silver streak of coming day paints all the black and lowering clouds that

roll stormily aside. And then at last the doctor comes, and the little figure is taken from its mother's arms. Another hour goes on to join the rank of those so weighted with agony and fear. And with it goes on suspense; with it flickers the little life in those cruel spasms of pain; flickers more and more faintly, watched with hope that only fades into despair.

The dawn breaks, the brightness of the new day bursts upon a waking world that welcomes it with life. But the brightness of the golden sun shines upon a baby face, that leans white and still and painless now upon its mother's breast, and something that is not the chillness of the morning strikes to her heart, stilling its throbs, stifling its agony of dread.

Her child is hers no longer!

With gentle touch, with pitying words, her friend strives to draw her from that room. In vain.

She kneels beside the little cot where the tiny figure lies so still, so calm now; her tearless eyes riveted on the lovely little face; eyes so wild, so passionate, so entreating, that none dare meet their gaze.

"He is only asleep; he has not—left me," she cries: and weeping, they stand aside and know not what to do.

Then Lady Etwynde bade them all go out, and knelt down by Lauraine's side. The tears dimmed her eyes, her gentle heart was wrung at the sight of this mute, blank suffering. "Dear, do try and realize it," she whispered tenderly. "It is hard, terribly hard, I know. But for him, doubtless it is best."

"Best!" Lauraine rose to her feet, and looked blankly around. The bath, the blankets, the paraphernalia of that brief illness; the sunlight streaming in through the window; the little figure so still, so strangely still, all struck on her with a dull, hopeless pain, as of something missing . . . gone out of her life. . . .

Then a low moan broke from her lips.

"Oh, God! let me die too!"

That awful day of pain and grief rolls on. To Lady Etwynde it seems the most terrible she has ever known. Lauraine has passed from one fit of unconsciousness into another. They watch and tend her in ever-increasing fear. Lady Etwynde has telegraphed to London for a physician, and also to Mrs. Douglas and Sir Francis, though she fears the latter will not receive her message without considerable delay, owing to the uncertainty of his movements.

In the darkened house they all move with hushed steps; and in one room, where noise and merriment has been so rife but yesterday, there is *something* lying white and still, with flowers piled high upon its snowy covering. Something from whose angelic beauty all trace of earth has passed, something in whose presence all grief is stilled, and tears forget to flow. Again and again does Lady Etwynde steal into that room and gaze on the exquisite face on which death has left no shadow of dread, no trace of pain. It seems as if only the mystery of sleep had sealed the marble lids, and left that strange, soft, trance-like calm upon the once restless body.

The little sinless soul must be happy now, she thinks; but, oh! the agony that is left, the awful sense of loss, loneliness, despair, through which that robbed and paralysed motherhood must wade . . . the deep waters ere comfort is reached . . . when every sight and sound will bring back the memory of loss, when every child's voice will strike sharp as a knife to the aching heart that holds the echo of but one. Alas, alas! for the desolation of this sad young life, that, clinging but to one joy amidst all the storms and sorrows and weariness around, sees it snatched suddenly from its hold, and looks out on a future blank and desolate as a starless night, where all is shrouded from sight and touch, and every landmark obliterated.

Another day comes to replace the wretchedness of this. Lauraine rises white and calm from her bed, and still dry-eyed and tearless, takes up life with its new

burden of sorrow. Arrangements, orders, all devolve upon her. No word has come from Sir Francis, but a telegram announces that her mother will be there that night. Lady Etwynde watches her in the deepest distress. This cold, strange, tearless grief is worse than the most frantic sorrow. It seems to chill all sympathy, to harden her, as it were, against all offers of consolation. When Mrs. Douglas arrives it is just the same. Her reception of her mother is almost cold, and, pleading fatigue as an excuse, she retires to her own rooms, leaving Lady Etwynde to do the entertaining.

Mrs. Douglas, who dislikes Lady Etwynde, grumbles openly at her daughter's strange behaviour.

"So odd, so cold, so unfeeling, as if I could not sympathize with her loss—I, who have lost two children of my own. And to shut herself apart from every one like that, it is positively unnatural."

"It has been an awful shock to her," says Lady Etwynde gravely.

"Of course, of course; but then, such a baby; and she is young, she will have plenty more. But I never knew any one so changed as Lauraine is since she married. She is not a bit like the same girl."

"Marriage does change people, you know," answers Lady Etwynde, looking calmly back at Mrs. Douglas. "And I never thought Lauraine was happy."

"Happy! What in heaven's name does she want? She has everything that could satisfy a woman, I am sure, and it was quite a—a love-match."

"Indeed!" says Lady Etwynde, arching her delicate eyebrows. "On whose side?"

Mrs. Douglas passes by this question loftily. "She is of a cold nature, and utterly different to me. I am sure if she had had to bear all the troubles and worries I have put up with during my life she might talk of unhappiness. Lauraine's unhappiness must be something like a crumpled rose-leaf, I imagine."

Lady Etwynde only looks quietly at her for a moment.

"I don't think you quite understand her," she says. "There may be natures that cannot find happiness in position, society, and—diamonds. Of course it is very odd that they should not do so, some sense or faculty must be wanting; but all the same, they do exist."

"I hope she is not going to begin one of her lectures on culture," thinks Mrs. Douglas in inward perturbation. Aloud she says: "It is very awkward, Sir Francis not being here. And yachting about, like he is doing, perhaps he won't get the news for ever so long. Who has made all the arrangements?"

"Lauraine," answers Lady Etwynde.

"But how odd, how cold. Why does she not have some one—the clergyman, or the doctor?"

"I don't think it is out of a mother's province to act as Lauraine is doing," answers Lady Etwynde, composedly. "My only regret is that she is so calm, so self-controlled. If she could only cry!"

"Ah!" murmurs Mrs. Douglas, plaintively. "I told you she was so cold and hard. Even as a child she seldom cried."

"Tears are no sign of deep feeling," says Lady Etwynde, sternly; "far otherwise. Some of the shallowest and most selfish people I have known, can cry for the least thing. Lauraine's grief is very terrible to me, because she will not give it natural outlet. I know what the child was to her."

Mrs. Douglas looks at the fire, and is silent.

She feels irritated, annoyed with Lauraine. Annoyed because she lets people see her unhappiness in the life chosen for her; annoyed because of her coldness and indifference towards herself. They have never had much in common; but since her marriage, since the suppression of that letter from Keith Athelstone, Lauraine has never been the same to her mother.

"So ridiculous not to make the best of her position," she thinks, impatiently. "What on earth is the use of pretending to be a martyr? Perhaps now that she

has lost the child she will think more of the father."

The father! He is at that moment stretched on a pile of cushions on the deck of his yacht, the blue, rippling waters turned to silver in the moonrays, and his eyes gazing up at the liquid, brimming orbs of the Lady Jean.

"Tired—with you?" he murmurs. "That could never be!"

And his wife stands broken-hearted by the side of their little dead child!

CHAPTER XV

The body faints sore,
It is tired in the race.

Do you know Erlsbach?

Very likely not. You won't find it in any map or guide-book, or directions to fashionable spas and watering-places. You won't find it by this name either, for its people call it differently. It is just a little dusky spot on the confines of the Austrian Tyrol, a little village shut in by pine forests washed by silvery waters; quaint, old world, unremarkable, but beautiful exceedingly.

In the warm June weather Erlsbach is at its best. So green, and fragrant, and cool, with soft airs blowing from the pine forests, and the gleam of snow on the mountain heights, and the emerald waters of the river shining in vivid brightness where the sunrays slant amidst the greenness of the boughs. It boasts of but one hotel does Erlsbach, a little old-fashioned hostelry, with nothing to recommend it save that it is very clean and picturesque, and its people are honest as the day.

To Erlsbach, and, as a matter of course, to the Kaiser Hof, come one June evening a party of two ladies and two maids, a courier, and luggage *en attendance.* Their arrival is expected, their rooms are taken; the best rooms, with a balcony overlooking the river, and that far-off view of the mountain heights beyond, where the purple light of evening is melting on the whiteness of eternal snows. When the bustle of arrival is over, one

of the two ladies comes out on the balcony and stands there for long, looking out at the pretty, peaceful scene. A voice from a room within speaks after a time:

"Do you like it, Lauraine?"

The figure moves, turns half round. "It is like a poem," she says, softly. "Like it? One can hardly say that; one *feels* it." The speaker advances and joins her.

"Yes; you are right. I only came here once; it was years ago, and my heart was heavy with a great sorrow. I left it behind me, Lauraine; buried it amid the lonely woods and mountain ways. Oh, my dear, my dear, if you might do the same?"

A sigh parts the beautiful grave lips of Lauraine Vavasour; she grows very pale. "That cannot be," she says, faintly. "I could never forget easily; and this, this was part of my life—myself. Do not let us speak of it, Etwynde; it hurts me still."

"People say to talk of their troubles lightens them."

"I am not like that then. My sorrow is shut in my heart. I cannot bear to profane it with speech."

"But it makes it so much harder to bear, Lauraine."

"Not to me; nothing on earth, even your sympathy, could lighten it."

Lady Etwynde is silent. Her thoughts go back to that dreary, awful time when the child's death was yet so new a thing; it is nearly nine months ago now, and Lauraine has been all that time in the gloomy old mansion on the Northumbrian shores. The funeral had been long over before Sir Francis returned, and then he had made but a brief stay, and gone to Scotland with some friends.

"Fretting could do no good," he said philosophically, and he hated the gloomy quietude of Falcon's Chase, and was only too glad to leave it. Lady Etwynde stayed with Lauraine all through that dreary winter; she could not bear to leave her alone in her grief and despair, for the sorrow seemed but to take deeper root in her nature. Even all Lady Etwynde's gentle sympathy could make no way. She half-feared and only half-comprehended this

new phase in her friend's character. For she could not know that Lauraine felt a terror of herself now; that it seemed to her as if the one safeguard she had clung to had been swept from her hold, and she lay anchorless, shelterless on the great dark sea of life, beholding no hope or ray of light, turn where she would.

The chill of winter passed into the fair, sweet month of spring; but no change came to her. Nothing seemed to thaw the ice about her heart. A strange chill and silence from the outer world rested upon her life as it was now. Of all her many friends and acquaintances none seemed to remember her or heed her. Keith had written again and yet again; she had never answered him once. She *dared* not. His sympathy, his presence would have been a comfort too great not to be dangerous, and the more she longed for them the more rigorously she denied them to herself. With the spring her husband wrote to know whether she wanted to come to town for the season. She read the letter with a shuddering horror. The season! To dance, drive, gossip, kill time in a round of empty pleasures; sate herself with luxury and extravagance. The thought seemed loathsome to her now. Her youth and all that was best in her seemed to have died with her little child. Her eyes seemed ever to have that look in them that has so frightened and pained her friend; the look as of tears that could not fall.

She was awfully, terribly changed, both in body and mind, and when Lady Etwynde paid her a flying visit, tearing herself from aesthetic joys and the glories of the Grosvenor Gallery Exhibition, and endless *réunions* among the cultured, she was shocked and alarmed at the alteration.

"You must leave here, or you will go melancholy mad!" she said, imperatively; and Lauraine, having arrived at that stage when she was too spiritless and too indifferent to oppose any vigorous scheme, yielded passively, and was borne off to Erlsbach.

Sir Francis, of course, could not come. He liked

London, and was not going to give up its thousand and one enjoyments for the sake of an invalid's whim. Her mother offered voluntarily to sacrifice herself in the matter; but Lauraine would not hear of it, and in the end she and Lady Etwynde, under charge of an experienced courier, set out for Germany and, travelling by slow and easy stages, arrived one warm June evening at quaint, pretty Erlsbach.

"But, Lauraine," says Lady Etwynde, continuing the conversation after a long, thoughtful pause, "have you ever considered that it is like putting yourself in rebellion against God to go on like this? All strokes of sorrow are sent for some wise purpose. We do not see it, believe it, at the time; but, later on——"

"Ah," interrupts Lauraine, "that is just it. It has not come to 'later on' with me. I had but one thing to make me happy; it has gone. Don't expect me to be consoled in a few months."

"But, my dear, you have your husband, your duties. Do you know it seems to me as if you were, in a way, estranging yourself from him?"

"He can find plenty of amusement in the world," says Lauraine, coldly. "Little Frank was nothing to him, except just simply the heir who would come after him in due time, and keep the estates in the family. But to me——" She breaks off abruptly.

The faint wind from the pine woods blows over her head and ruffles the soft dusky curls above her brow. In that dim light, with her pale, beautiful face turned upwards to the purple sky, she looks so young, so fair, so sorrowful, that a rush of tears dims Lady Etwynde's eyes as she gazes at her. "I didn't think she would have taken her sorrow to heart like this. How little one knows, after all!" she thinks to herself.

A week drifts by. Amidst that tranquil pastoral loveliness, amidst the beauty of the woods and streams, in the whole dreamy, simple life they lead, Lauraine rests and

rejoices in such quiet, unecstatic fashion as is left to her. Her sorrow seems less hard and cold a thing here; the angel face of her lost darling comes with a more tender grace to her memory. She can talk and even smile with something of the old playful witchery that used to be hers. There is always something new to see; there are no landmarks here as at Falcon's Chase to recall the footsteps of that baby life whose journeying was so short a one. She begins to feel a little interest in places and things once more. She likes Lady Etwynde's talk, even when it may be on culture and ethics; she can listen to her when she reads out, which she does admirably as well as judiciously. On the whole, there is a decided improvement about the mental "tone" that delights Lady Etwynde, though she never appears to notice it.

Life and worldly cares, and even worldly joys, seemed sometimes to sink into almost insignificance amidst these mountain solitudes. They were so grand, so sublime, so immovable. Their lessons came home to Lauraine's aching heart, and soothed and comforted it insensibly to herself. She grew less sad, she brooded less over what she had lost. She had no hope, nothing to look forward to; yet still the present so steeped her in peace and rest that it seemed to her in after years as if these fragrant forests, this wilderness of ferns and flowers, these foaming waters, and far-off gleam of shining glaciers and crowning snows, had possessed some magic power that insensibly soothed and lulled her heart's long pain.

Late one afternoon she and Lady Etwynde are returning from a drive to a little village some two miles distant. The sun is just setting above the forest heights, there is alternate light and gloom among the heavy foliage, those beautiful shades of green and gold that make up so much of the charm of a wood. Lady Etwynde is driving rather quickly, and the road is narrow. Before them she sees the figure of a horseman proceeding leisurely along. At the near approach of the ponies' rapid trot he draws his horse aside to make room. Lauraine leaning back in

the little low carriage, gives a careless glance up as she passes, then all the pallor of her face flushes deepest scarlet; she starts forward with an exclamation of amazement. Lady Etwynde notices it, and reins in the ponies. "Mr. Athelstone! Is it possible?" she says.

In astonishment quite as genuine, Keith draws the bridle, and bends towards the two figures.

"What a strange meeting," he says, as he shakes hands first with Lauraine, then with Lady Etwynde.

"I thought you were in London," Lauraine says quickly. After one wild leap of joy her heart seems to grow still and cold with a great dread. What evil fate, she wonders, has thrown him across her path now?

They are all too genuinely astonished to be embarrassed, and Keith proceeds to explain how he has been mountaineering for the last month in the Tyrol district; how his headquarters at present are that very little village they have just visited; and how he has ridden over to Erlsbach from idle curiosity, to see what the place is like. Of course there remains nothing for it but to invite him to the Kaiser Hof, and an hour later the trio are sitting at dinner, the table drawn close by the open window, and the fresh pine-scented air blowing in cool and soft from the mountains. Keith and Lauraine talk very little to each other. The brunt of the conversation falls on Lady Etwynde, and she in no way objects. Keith has always been a favourite of hers, and they have many sharp and witty arguments, while that pale, grave figure in the soft draperies listens and smiles, and feels at once disturbed and restless, and yet glad.

Sooner or later they would meet. She had known that always, but had never dreamt of it being so soon, or so strangely.

Somehow in life the meetings we expect never do take place as we expect them. We may rehearse our little scenes as carefully as we please, we may arrange our looks, our words, the very tones of our voices, but when the actual *rencontre* does occur it is sure to be utterly different,

and the carefully-arranged programme is never carried out.

It is so with Lauraine now. She has sometimes longed, sometimes dreaded to meet him, but always imagined it at some distant time and in some totally different manner; and now Keith is sitting at her table, her own guest, smiling, talking, looking at her to all appearance as unconcerned and forgetful as if that "garden scene" had never been enacted.

He is a better actor than herself, and he determines to be it. She shows that she is troubled, pained, perplexed. He ignores everything that might lead to that past, is careless, cynical, indifferent as of yore; but all the time his heart is beating with tumultuous pain; he is thinking how sadly altered she is, how changed from the bright, beautiful Lauraine of his boyhood, and yet dearer to him in her sufferings and sorrow than in any years that are past. It is hard work to keep down the thoughts that are thronging, the love that is leaping, the joy that is thrilling his every sense; but he knows it must be done, and he succeeds in doing it and in deceiving Lauraine. The cloth is removed. The soft dusk settles on the pretty quiet scene without. Lady Etwynde, who dislikes a glare of light, blows out nearly all the illumination of candles in the room, and they sit there by the window watching the stars come out one by one, talking less now, but with something grave and earnest in the talk that it has lacked before.

At last Lady Etwynde rises, and, saying she has letters to write, moves away to a little inner room, partitioned off by curtains from the one where they have all been sitting. It is solitude, yet not solitude. The sense of being together, the knowledge that their low tones are unheard, is just restrained by the feeling that another person is close at hand. Keith is silent for some moments, then bends towards Lauraine.

"You never answered my letters; I could hardly expect it. But I do hope you believe I felt for your grief?"

"Yes," she answers, simply; "I always felt sure of that."

"I am glad you say so. When you never wrote I thought you were offended, indifferent, perhaps. It has been a terribly blank time for me."

"I think you have no right to tell me that," she says, flushing and paling with nervous agitation. "I cannot help you, and it only adds to the sufferings of my own life that yours is also sad."

"Sad!" he echoes, wearily. "If you only knew *how* sad. But you are right; I ought not to speak of that. How strange it seems to meet you here; almost makes one believe in Fate! To think that I rose this morning and rode off haphazard, not even guessing you were within a hundred miles of me, and now, at evening, I am sitting by your side!"

"How is it you have forsaken the London season?"

"It I told you the *real* truth you would be angry, and I cannot utter conventional lies to you, Lorry."

She trembles a little. Her eyes go out to the shining river that mirrors the silver glory of the starlight. At her heart a dull pain beats. "Your friends, the Americans, where are they?" she asks evasively.

"In Paris, I believe. At least, they may have left now; but they were there up to May. Nan is mad about Paris." "Nan," be it remarked, is what he always calls Miss Anastasia Jefferson. Lauraine knows this, and smiles a little.

"You and she are as great friends as ever, I suppose?" she remarks.

"She is a jolly little girl," Keith answers, carelessly. "Yes, I suppose we are friends in a way. We are always quarrelling, and yet always making it up."

"Why don't you—marry—her?" asks Lauraine.

He stares at her as if uncertain of what he has heard. "Marry Nan! Good Lord! I never dreamt of such a thing!"

"Other people have," continues Lauraine; "even the girl herself, I fancy."

He laughs a little bitterly. "What fad have you got

into your head? Nan looks upon me as a sort of elder brother. There has never been anything of 'that sort' between us. As for marrying, well, *you* ought to know I am not likely to do that."

"I think you ought to marry," says Lauraine, very quietly. "You see you have wealth and position, and yet you lead such a 'homeless' kind of life. That is the only word that expresses it. And some day surely you will think of settling down; you cannot be always like this."

"*You* counsel me to marry," he says, with bitterness. "Have you found the experience so pleasant a one?"

The crimson colour rushes all over the proud fair face. "That has nothing to do with it," she says, coldly.

"Has it not? Well, if I choose to be faithful to a memory, that is my look out. I am not one to forget easily, as I have told you before."

"And you don't care for Miss Jefferson?" asks Lauraine, unwisely.

He looks at her in silence for a moment, and under the strong magnetism of his glance, her eyes turn from the scene without and meet his own.

"I think *you* should know," he says, very softly.

There comes the sound of a rustling skirt, a closing door. Lady Etwynde has left the inner room; they are alone. In an instant he is kneeling by the low chair on which she sits. Her hands are clasped in his.

"Oh, Lorry, Lorry!" he cries; "it *is* so hard!"

The passionate plaint thrills to her very heart. She lays her hands on either shoulder, and looks down into the pain-filled depths of the blue eyes.

"I know it, dear," she says, very gently. "Is it not hard for me too?"

"You are so cold, so different, and then you have your home, your husband, your——. Oh, forgive me, darling! How could I be so thoughtless?"

He sees the spasm of pain on the white face, the sudden quiver of the soft red lips.

"I—I have nothing now!" she groans, despairingly,

and her two hands go up to hide her face. A storm of passionate weeping shakes her from head to foot. Keith is alarmed, distressed, but he is wise enough to rise and stand quietly by. He attempts no consolation.

The storm abates at last. Those tears have done Lauraine good. She has been cold and hard in her grief for so long a time. She also rises, a little ashamed, a little confused. "Let us go out on the balcony," she says, and he follows her without a word.

It seems like a dream to him; a dream that will never be forgotten, that will haunt his memory with a vivid thrill of pain whenever he feels the scents of mountain air, or sees the gleam of quiet stars. With them, too, he will see the little balcony of the quaint old "Hof," and a slender figure with draperies of dusky black, and a face white, solemn, inexpressibly sad that looks back to his.

"Keith," she says, very gently, "there has come a time when I must be frank with you. You say you do not forget, that you cannot. In that case, if you have any honour at all, you must see that you should avoid me. Of myself, of my pain, I will not speak. What use? Between us two lies a barrier we can never cross. When you say such words to me as you have said to-night, you make the very question of friendship an impossibility. Is there any thought in our minds that in any way is cold enough for *that*. I doubt it. Mind, I say 'ours.' I make no pretence at deceiving you."

"You do not deny that you love me?"

"Of what use?" she says. "I made a fatal error in my marriage. But error or not, I must keep to it and its consequences. Only, Keith, if you had any pity, and mercy, you would avoid me, leave me to fight out my life alone. At least I owe my husband—fidelity."

A hundred words rush to his lips. It is in his mind then to tell her of what her husband really is; of the scandals that are whispered in club and boudoir, over cigarettes and Souchong, but something restrains him. It would be mean, he thinks; and, after all, would it

make any difference to her? Had she been any other woman. . . . And, after all, she loves *him*, not her husband. On that small crumb of comfort he feeds his starved and aching heart, standing there beside her, silent, troubled, fighting against every wild and passionate impulse that bids him fling honour and scruples to the wind, and snatch at the perilous joy of a sinful happiness.

"Yes," she says, with a heavy sigh. "I must at least give that. The best part of me and my life is laid in the grave of my little child. Often I think I shall never feel glad again, but after to-night I leave it to you whether you are to make my life harder for me, or help me to struggle against myself."

His eyes gleam with momentary anger, petulance, pride. "You give me a hard enough task, I hope," he says passionately. "And yet your last words hold all the tempting that could possibly beset a man. Why should I save you from yourself? By heaven if you loved me, if you only knew *how* I love you, you would not count the cost of anything that stood between us and our happiness!"

"Would it be happiness?" answers Lauraine. "I think *not*, Keith. Is a guilty love ever happy? Does it ever last? If it did the world would not teem with forsaken women, nor the rivers of our great cities bear such burdens of shame and despair."

"You do not know me, if you doubt. Have I not been true to you, since, boy and girl, we stood together, and played at sweethearts in the old Grange garden at Silverthorne? Till I die I shall remember you, and love you, Lorry."

"Other men have said the same, and have forgotten."

"Other men! Yes; but you surely know me well enough to believe me."

"It is because I believe you that I wish to save you deeper pain. You cannot command your feelings, and I —I must not listen to you now. It is wrong, shameful."

He moves impatiently. "Your words are very

cruel. But to me you have always been that. You could not be true to me even for a few years."

She shudders as if a blow had struck her. "It is ungenerous to speak of that now; you know the fault was not all mine."

But Keith is in no mood to listen to her. His blood is on fire, his heart is hot and angry, and he feels that sort of rage within him that longs to spend itself in bitter words and unjust reproaches, even to one he loves as dearly as he loves Lauraine. There is a sort of savage satisfaction in making her suffer too, and he pours out a fury of wrath and reproach as she stands there mute and pale and still.

"I am not ice, like yourself," he says, in conclusion, "Other women love, and forget all else for love. You—you are too cold and prudent. I am young, and you have wrecked my whole life, and given me nothing but misery. I wish I had died a thousand deaths before I had seen you!"

A shiver as of intense cold passes over her. She knows Keith's wild temper of old, but she had not thought it was in him to speak as he had spoken to her. She forgets that a great love borders almost on hate, so intense may be its passions, its longing, its despair.

"After all," says Keith, with a mocking laugh that grates terribly on her ear, "why *should* I not follow your advice as well as your example? Why should I eat my heart out, and waste my life on an empty love? You have told me to leave you; that you wish to see me no more. Very well; *this* time I will take you at your word. I will leave you, and let the future prove who was right or wisest. I—I will go away! I *will* forget!"

"It is well," she says, her voice low and faint. "I deserve all you have said, and more. I have only brought sorrow to you! Go away, live your own life, forget me, and be happy again."

"Those are your last words?"

"Yes. My life is hard and sad enough; you would

add to it shame and misery and undying remorse, and call that a proof of—love. Forgive me if I cannot see it in the same light as yourself."

"And I say you do not love me, and never did, or you would know——"

"Very well," she interrupts, "believe that. It is best that you should."

"And I am to go now?" he says, sorrowful and hesitating. "If you send me from you to-night, Lauraine, I will never come back. Remember that."

Both of them are hurt and angry now, both beset with cruel pain, and waging that terrible conflict with passionate love and wounded pride that is at once so ill-judged, and resentful a thing.

Lauraine looks steadily away from the entreating, watchful eyes; away, away to the far-off mountain range swept with faint grey clouds, silvered by the clear moonlight and the haze of the shining stars.

"If he only knew," she thinks, in the depths of her aching heart, "if he only, only knew!"

But he does not know. To him she is only cold, calculating, unloving. Right and pure he knows in her mode of loving and thinking; but what man who loves as Keith loves can see right and purity as they are?

"I have never asked you to come back," says Lauraine, faint and low, "and be very sure I never will. I am sorry that you are angry with me. Perhaps to-morrow you will be sorry too. But I know it is best."

"Good-bye then!"

She turns, and gives him her hand. He looks at her long, and the blue eyes grow misty, the fire and anger die out. He bends suddenly forward and touches her fingers with his lips. He does not speak another word, only drops her hand and goes.

The echo of his footsteps dies away. The door closes with a heavy sound. With a stifled sob Lauraine falls on her knees, and leans her head against the low railings of the flower-covered balcony.

"Dear Heaven! how hard it is to do right!" she moans.

The wind stirs the pine boughs, and the stars shine calmly down. They have seen so much of trouble, have heard so much despair, and to them a human life is such a little space to sorrow in, or be glad.

CHAPTER XVI

Cry, O lover,
Love is over.

WHEN Lady Etwynde comes back, she finds Lauraine lying cold and insensible on the little balcony.

In great alarm she tries to recover her to consciousness, and at last succeeds. With a heavy sigh the dark eyes open, and Lauraine rises and goes back to her low lounge by the window, and there lies faint, white, and exhausted, while, with a great and tender pity, her friend hovers about, speaking soothing words, and asking nothing of the cause of this strange fainting fit. She can guess it well enough. Half an hour passes. Then Lauraine lifts her head with a little languid smile.

"You must think me very foolish," she says.

"Why should I?" asks Lady Etwynde, simply. "My dear, I think I know what is troubling you. I have known it long. Do not speak of it unless you wish, if it pains you in any way. But be sure of my sympathy always."

"I am sure of it," answers Lauraine. "I think I have never made a friend of any woman but you. You are always so good, and one always feels one can trust you. But you are right. Something *is* troubling me very much. I feel to-night as if life was altogether too hard!"

"Who of us does not feel *that* at some time or other?" says Lady Etwynde, sadly. "A time when to look back or to look forward seems alike equally hard; for during the one we think of what 'might have been,' and during the other we dread to think what *may* be. There are two very sad things in this life: the waste of love, the dearth of happiness. Both of these are with you now. They

were with me once. But I lived through the struggle, and you will do the same. You think it is impossible now. Ah, my dear, so did I; so does every one who suffers. And yet physical force drags us on whether we will or not."

"I have been very foolish," says Lauraine, the tears standing in her eyes as they look out at the quiet night. "When I was young, a mere girl, Keith and I betrothed ourselves. You know my mother was his guardian, and all our childhood was passed together. No one could influence him or manage him as I could. He was always impulsive, reckless, passionate, but oh! so loving and so generous of heart. Well, as we grew older the love seemed to grow with us. Then my mother began to notice it. She became alarmed; we were parted; but still neither of us forgot. At last Keith spoke to my mother. Of course she laughed, and treated it as a boy's fancy. He had nothing, and we were not rich; at least, so she said always. He grew angry, and said he would go abroad, and make a fortune. She said 'very well; when he had made it he could come back and claim me.' In the end he went to America. We were not allowed to correspond, and year after year went by. I heard nothing from him or about him. Then I was introduced to London life. I had a season of triumphs, gaiety, amusements. I will not say it weakened my memory of Keith, but at least it filled up the emptiness of my life, and I was young, and enjoyment seemed easy enough. In my third season, I met Sir Francis Vavasour. From that time my mother's whole soul was bent on a marriage between us. I cannot tell you now the thousand and one things that combined to throw us together, to wind a web about my careless feet. The memory of Keith had grown less distinct. Four years had passed, and no sign. I began to think he had forgotten. Later on, I found my mother had deceived me. He *had* written to her, speaking always of his unfalterable fidelity; then came the news of brighter prospects of a great fortune in store;

of entreaty to tell me, and let me hear from him. She did nothing of the sort. She only told me that if I did not accept Sir Francis it meant ruin to her. That her debts were enormous; that I had cost her a small fortune in these three seasons; that—oh, I cannot tell you it all now. I am not naturally weak-minded, but I suffered myself to be persuaded. I never attempt to hold myself blameless; still, had I known about Keith. . . . Well, on my wedding-day, I received a letter from him. He was possessor of a large fortune, he loved me more than ever, and he would be in London, at our house, on that very day. Imagine my feelings. It was all too late then. Nothing could be done. I had to school myself as best I could to meet my girlhood's lover an hour after I had become Sir Francis Vavasour's wife. It was a terrible ordeal. Poor Keith! Oh, what I felt when I saw what I had given him to bear. He was half mad, and I—oh, how sick and ashamed and wicked I felt. We parted again, and for eighteen months we did not meet. Then he came to Rome one winter, and I was there. He greeted me like any other acquaintance. I thought he had forgotten. Gradually our old friendship was resumed. Gradually he became my constant companion, and the confidence and sympathy and interests of the past seemed to awaken, and be with us both again. I dreamt of no harm. He never by word or look betrayed that he loved me still. I thought it was all over and done with, and feared no danger. I was not unhappy. Sir Francis was very kind, and I had my boy. I troubled myself in no way about what might be said, Keith had been a sort of brother to me so long. We left Rome and came to London. Then it was that he betrayed himself; then it was that I too learnt I cared for him as I had no right to do."

"And the Gloire de Dijon roses were left under the cedar tree," murmurs Lady Etwynde, faintly.

Lauraine starts and blushes. "Yes, it was that night. I almost hate to think of it, and yet—oh, Etwynde, *can*

I help loving him? *Can* I tear him out of my heart?"

"My dear," says her friend, gravely, "if love were within our power to give, or to withhold, life would be an easy enough matter for most of us. It has been at cross purposes always. I suppose it won't change tactics, even for our advanced age."

"Well," sighs Lauraine, wearily, "I did what I could, but Keith made me promise that I would not banish him; that I would let him see me sometimes still; that——"

"My dear," murmurs Lady Etwynde, gently, "you were never so foolish as that?"

"I was," answers Lauraine. "I—I pitied him so, and he seemed so desperate, and I had done him all the wrong. I am not a bit of a heroine, Etwynde. I have little moral strength, and he promised he would speak of love no more, so——"

"So you believed him?" interpolates Lady Etwynde. "Of course, man like, he—kept his promise?"

"Until—to-night," falters Lauraine. "When I saw him, when we met as we did, I cannot tell you how awful I felt. It was as if Fate had purposely thrown him across my path when I was most weak, and most unhappy."

"And what have you done?" asks Lady Etwynde, pityingly.

"I have sent him away—for ever!"

"Lauraine, had you strength——"

"Oh," says Lauraine, with a little hysterical laugh, "we quarrelled desperately first. He said some dreadful things to me, and I—I don't know if I was not equally hard and unjust. But in any case it was better than sentiment—was it not? The next thing we shall hear is that he is going to marry Miss Anastasia Jane Jefferson."

"Lauraine, you are jesting!" exclaims Lady Etwynde. "What, that little American doll who 'guesses' and 'calculates,' and is only a few degrees better than Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe? Impossible! I know she has a *penchant* for him—at least, it looked like it—but after loving you——"

"Oh, it will be 'moonlight after sunlight,'" says Lauraine, bitterly, "if I may copy Tennyson and say so. Why should he make a martyr of himself? I can be nothing to him, and it is all shame, and sin, and horror now. Oh, God! that I should live to say so—my darling boy——" A sob breaks from her. She thinks of Keith—bold, bright, *debonnaire* Keith, with his sunny smile and his bold, bright eyes that for her were always so soft and loving; Keith, with his merry ways and wild freaks, and steadfast, tender heart; Keith as he *was*, as he never again can be to her, in all the years to come!

"It is all my fault—mine!" she cries between her heavy sobs. "And I have made him so unhappy; and if he goes to the bad, if he gets wild and reckless, oh, what shall I do? How can I sit and bear my life, and look on *his*, as if it were nothing to me?"

Lady Etwynde kneels beside her and puts her arms round her in silence. "It will be hard, terribly hard," she says, tenderly. "But oh, my dear, you have had strength to do what was right to-day. You will have strength to bear the consequences."

"Was it right?" wails Lauraine, in exceeding bitterness. "He said not. He called me cold and calculating, and said I have spoilt all his life now, and he is so young, and I—— Oh, how I could love him now!"

"Hush!" whispers Lady Etwynde, gently; "you must not think of that. Right! Of course it was right, Men are so selfish, that unless a woman ruins herself for their sake they will always say she does not love. *Love!* Faugh, the word as they mean it is different to our interpretation. I have not patience to think of it. Love is something purer, holier, nobler than sensual gratification. It is sympathy, it is fidelity without reward; it is consecration without a vow. Did we take our teaching of it from *them*, Heaven help us all. Thank God, something within us helps us to the right, the pure, the better part of it. Lauraine, do not waste your pity thus. What right had he to dishonour you in your grief, your

loneliness, by any such words as these? If indeed he loved you, you should have been sacred to him for your child's sake, even though he ignored your husband. Can you not see it too, dear? As for saying you have ruined his life, that is cowardly. He does not love you worthily or he would never have uttered so weak a reproach." She ceases. She feels the shudder that runs through the slender figure. She knows her words hurt and sting, but she is pained and angered and sore distressed. She feels a hatred and intolerance of Keith Athelstone's selfish passion.

"You do not know," murmurs Lauraine; "you cannot judge. Of love no one can, save just the two who love. For them it is all so different, and everything else looks of such small account."

A warm flush comes over her face; she dashes the tears away from her eyes. Lady Etwynde unloosens the clasp of her arms, and stands up, a little stern, a little troubled.

"You are right. An outsider must always take a calmer and more dispassionate view of the matter; but I hope in time you will see him as he is. Once you were married, your lives lay apart. He should not have come near you, and, from your own account, he has broken all laws of honour, and put the selfishness of passion before everything that is good and honest and pure."

"You are hard on him," says Lauraine, quietly. "You don't know him as I do. No one ever did seem to understand Keith but myself."

"He is certainly no paragon of virtue," Lady Etwynde answers, contemptuously. "But, my darling, don't let us quarrel over him. He is a man, and I know what men are when they love. As for you, you have behaved nobly, despite your pain. Believe me, the thought will bring its own comfort in time, and—you say—he will never come back again?"

"So he said."

"Has he never said that before?"

"Yes," answers Lauraine; "on my wedding-day."

"I hope he will keep his word this time then," says Lady Etwynde. "He can do you no good, and he only makes your life more unhappy. My dear, be wise for the future, and avoid him."

"That is my only wish now," answers Lauraine, rising from her low chair and passing her hand wearily across her aching brow. "And my only safety, too," she adds, in her own heart.

But Lady Etwynde hears only the first sentence, and is glad of it and content.

"He will not be faithful," she thinks, as she moves by Lauraine's side to her chamber on the next floor. "Men never are. So much life has taught me!"

CHAPTER XVII

"AFTER a storm comes a calm."—It seemed as if a calm, the calm of a great despair had settled on Lauraine. All human love had passed out of her life; and that life itself looked grey, colourless as an autumn sky that has known no sunshine. But there was something in this dull stupor that kept the sharpness of pain in abeyance, that left her, to outward seeming, much the same as ever, and rejoiced Lady Etwynde's heart.

"After all," she thinks to herself, "she could not have loved him so very much."

She does not attempt to allude to the confidence of that night, nor does Lauraine return to it. Just for two or three days she watches with anxious eyes the arrival of the post: she is half fearful of a letter from Keith, a letter that will be a sort of blaze of anger, and upbraiding, like his own last words. But there comes neither letter nor sign.

After a week or two Lauraine begins to get restless.

"This is a place to sleep and dream in," she says to her friend; "I want to see some life again. Let us go to Baden or Monaco."

Lady Etwynde is amazed.

"Will Sir Francis object?" she asks.

Lauraine smiles with faint contempt. "He never troubles himself about what I do," she says. "We will go, and if he objects, we can leave again!"

Lady Etwynde yields, and they go to Baden.

Lauraine seems now to have as great a horror of solitude as before she has had of gaiety. She is always out, always restless. No one they know of the fashionable world is at Baden, it being yet too early in the season. It is crowded with Germans and Austrians, and adventurers of all nationalities, who throng the pretty Kursaal under the shadow of the pine-crowned hills.

Lauraine makes numerous acquaintances, and is always inventing projects of amusements, such as picnics, excursions, *fêtes*, drives, and balls. She goes to concerts and theatres, she is one of the loungers in the shady alleys of the Lichtenthal; she goes to supper-parties that to Lady Etwynde seem reckless and *risqué*, and meets all her friend's feeble remonstrances with the unanswerable argument that her husband does not mind, and therefore no one else need trouble their head about it.

She seems so horribly, unaccountably changed that it fills Lady Etwynde's mind with dread and pain.

Better the morbid grief, the dreary apathy of the past, than this feverish and unnatural gaiety, this craving for excitement and pleasure. Just as suddenly as she has gone to Baden, so suddenly does she tire of it. "She will go down the Rhine," she declares, "and stop anywhere that is pretty and picturesque." The change of programme delights her friend, and they leave their circle of new acquaintances desolate at their sudden departure.

The lovely scenery and the constant change seem for a while to quiet Lauraine's restlessness. She takes a fancy to Bingen, and stays there for a month; but it distresses Lady Etwynde to see how pale and thin she is getting, how weary and sleepless her eyes always look.

A letter comes one day from Sir Francis. He is coming to Baden for the races; he is going to run a horse for the

Prix de Dames. They had better remain abroad and meet him there. He will arrange for rooms at the Bairischer Hof, or D'Angleterre, as a lot of people are coming at the same time. Meanwhile he hopes Lauraine is tired of moping, and intends to be reasonable again.

She reads the letter quietly through, and then hands it to Lady Etwynde.

"I can scarcely expect you to continue giving up your time to me as you have done," she says. "But this arrangement suits me very well. It is quiet and pleasant here, and I shall remain on till the time fixed for Baden. But you—there is your home, your own friends——"

"Unless you are tired of me," interrupts Lady Etwynde, "I am not going to run away. I do not think you are either in health or spirits to be left alone."

They are at the Victoria Hof. Their rooms are very pleasant; their life has been more like what it was at Erlsbach, spent chiefly in the open air, in drives and rambles and excursions on the river, and visits to the beautiful old Rochus Capelle, which, for Lauraine, has endless interest, and of which she never seems to tire.

This evening they are both sitting by the open window overlooking the Rhine. In these hot summer nights Lauraine has cast aside her heavy black dresses, and wears chiefly white, with knots of black ribbon here and there. Lady Etwynde thinks how lovely she looks, sitting there, with the sunrays touching her dusky hair, her soft snowy gown, her slender hands that are idly folded on her lap.

Instinctively she comes forward and kneels by her side. "Am I to go, Lauraine?" she asks, softly.

For all answer Lauraine clasps her round the neck, and bursts into tears. "No, no; a thousand times no!" she cries, weeping. "You are the only one left to me to love. Don't leave me quite dosolate."

"I will not," answers Lady Etwynde, softly. "I wish I could be of some use—of some help; but in these cases the tenderest sympathy seems to hurt. No one can help us."

"You speak as if you too had 'loved and lost'?" says Lauraine, wiping the tears from her eyes, and looking at the beautiful, noble face beside her.

A faint warmth of colour comes over it; the proud head, with its golden halo of hair, droops a little. "Yes," she says, "I have. Sometimes I think it was my own fault, after all I was too proud, too exacting. Shall I tell you the story? Would you care to hear?"

"Indeed, I would," said Lauraine, earnestly.

"He was a soldier," begins Lady Etwynde. "I was seventeen; romantic to my finger-tips. He, thirty years or more; bronzed, bold, stalwart, a king among men, I always thought. We met at my first season in London, loved, were engaged. He was of good family, but not rich. My parents objected strongly at first; but I was their only child, and they had never crossed whim or wish of mine. Of course I gained my point. Oh, how happy I was! It was like all the ecstasy of dreams, all the fancies of poets, all the purity and waking passion of first love steeping my life in golden glamour. I only lived, watched, thought for him, and he—all the time—he deceived me!"

Her voice breaks. The bitterness and anguish of that time seems present over again. The colour fades from her cheeks as she kneels there in the radiant moonlight.

"No man comes to thirty years of age without a 'past' of some sort," she resumes. "But I, in my childish ignorance, imagined him another Bayard. He had been so brave, his name was crowned with so many laurels. He seemed the very soul of honour, of truth, and I—I loved him so. And one night, oh, shall I ever forget that night? We had gone down to Richmond to dinner. We had been out on the river afterwards. It was a warm June night, so fair, so still, so fragrant, and he rowed the boat himself and the rest of the party left us far behind. Suddenly another boat passed us; there were two men in it, and a woman. I remember noticing she had something scarlet wrapped about her and was very dark;

foreign-looking I fancied. They were rowing fast, their boat shot by. I heard a cry, the sound of a name—*his* name—and he was sitting before me, his face white as death, his eyes full of horror and doubt. 'Good God!' I heard him cry, 'and she is *not* dead?'

"My heart seemed to stand still. Then I grew very calm and cold. 'Who is that woman, Cyril?' He stared at me like one in a dream, and turned the boat back without a word and rowed me to the hotel. Then he led me up one of the quiet river walks, and standing there before me told me the whole sickening, miserable tale. There may have been extenuation in it. I saw none. I was young and ignorant of life and of men, and cruel, I suppose. He called me so. I could only cling to one fact—that she had been his wife. What mattered to me the folly, the caprice, the infatuation that had chained his hot youth and held him powerless now? What mattered to me anything, anything, save that he was lost to me, that my idol was shattered, my heart was broken. 'You told me you had loved no other woman as you loved me,' I said, scornfully; 'and all the time, all the time, you had given her the surest, truest proof of love a man can give. Pity! No, I have no pity! You made your choice, you must abide by it. If you were free this hour I would not marry you now. You have deceived me. Your love was a pretence; perhaps you call it also such names as you have called hers. Go to her, your wife; I never will voluntarily look upon your face again.' Oh, Lauraine, was I cruel, was I unjust; God knows. Oh, the bitterness, the agony, the shame of that night. I felt as if I hated him in the new sharp fever of jealousy that had come to my heart. I hated to think he had belonged to another, held her to his heart, kissed her, loved or seemed to love her. My whole nature seemed to change. I could only think he had deceived me, whether willingly, or mercifully did not matter. Love, youth, joy, hope, all seemed to die out of my heart. Nothing he said seemed to soften me. I would not listen,

I would not yield, I would not pity. He left me, and I never saw him again. The next news I had was that he had gone abroad on foreign service. I had seen his name from time to time, but of his life, the life I once so fondly hoped to share, I know nothing!"

Lauraine touches the trembling hands. "You were hard on him, I think," she says gently. "I suppose he thought her dead—that he was free."

"He said so," answers Lady Etwynde. "Oh, yes, and doubtless he believed it. He could not have dared to offer such an insult to me, or my family. But what I resented was that he should have kept the story back, that he should have pretended that I was his first, his only love, and all the time *she* had been his wife. I could not forgive that!"

"But, my dear," says Lauraine, gently, "you may have had his first *real* love. The other was but a youthful folly, a hot-headed infatuation. Does any man come to us with his heart pure and free? Few, I think, if any. We cannot judge them by ourselves. That is how so many women wreck their lives. They expect too much. No man can ever be what a girl's dreams would make him. But it is so hard for her to believe that."

"I know it now," answers Lady Etwynde. "I have learnt my lesson in bitterness and grief. But I think it has done me good. I have forgiven him long ago. I shall never see him again to tell him so, I suppose; perhaps he would not care even to hear it. But I am happier since I could pardon and pity his weakness, only—my Bayard he could never be again!"

"And of her? Do you know anything about her fate?" asks Lauraine, forgetful of her own sorrows in this new interest.

"I heard she was dead. She was a vile, cruel woman. He divorced her afterwards, but what was that to me? What can anything be to me now that concerns his name, his life?" There comes a long silence. The thoughts of both are busy with sad memories. As Lauraine looks

at Lady Etwynde's face she sees it is full of pain, but her eyes have a dreamy look, as the eyes of one who sees some sweet vision afar off.

"I was wrong, I suppose," she says, slowly. "A woman who loves must forget *herself* in that love, and I, I thought too much of my wounded pride, my lost ideal. But I have never held a thought of love for any other man. The lips that he kissed were his first, they will be his for ever. I have never forgotten; and now I am thirty years old, and my parents, as you know, are dead, and I live alone, and am looked upon as a marvel of eccentricity, and have my school of apostles and fool them to the top of their bent. Sometimes life seems a horrible travesty of all that is dignified and pure, and sometimes a jest that one laughs at and forgets. But no one knows me as I really am, save you, Lauraine. To most people I suppose I hardly seem a woman. But my true self and my lost love live a life apart, a life of dreams, sad but yet beautiful. A life that feeds itself on memories, memories that are recalled by the colours of every changing sky, the scents of leaf and flower that touch one like a sound of music. Ah! those nights, those mornings, those scenes that are the same, yet *not* the same, how they make one's whole soul sick with longing, and mad with regret!"

"And you have borne all this so long?" says Lauraine, wonderingly.

"Yes, she answers; "it seems long, does it not? And I have not pined away much. I don't look like a love-lorn maiden, do I? I have not gone into a decline, or fallen away to a shadow, or grown grey with sorrow, or done anything I ought to have done according to romancers. I suppose no one I know ever suspects that I have had a love-story, much less that I cherish its memory."

"Your nature must be a very constant one," says Lauraine. "You make me ashamed of myself. No wonder Keith reproaches me with unfaithfulness."

"I think fidelity is an established instinct," says Lady

Etwynde. "It is very much an accident of our own natures. To me, it seems an utter impossibility to even think of caring for another man. Cyril Carlisle was my first lover; I gave him all that was in me to give. It was all my life to me. I suppose—to him—it was but another experience."

"Yours is a grand nature," says Lauraine, looking wonderingly at the calm, noble face. "You shame me for myself. If I had but kept true a little space——"

"One can never judge of another's case by one's own," answers Lady Etwynde. "No doubt you were tried, hurried into it. I know, oh! I know. You are not the first girl who has told me the same, nor will you be the last. The mothers of Society do it all for the best, doubtless. Love seems such a poor, contemptible thing in their eyes in comparison with—settlements. Oh, yes! that is so always. Perhaps they forget their own youth; one does, they say, when one outlives romance. And I suppose an 'Establishment' is better than poetry any day. They are wise, after all. Year after year the season has its martyrs. Girls are brought out and introduced with no higher aim or object set before them than a 'great marriage.' Fashion and Society expect it. I suppose it is what they were born for! Thank God! my parents were neither ambitious nor mercenary. Perhaps I too might have been over-persuaded. I don't think it likely. Still——"

She hesitates and looks compassionately at Lauraine's sad face. "You must try and be brave, dear, and bear your life as it is. Regrets, repining, sorrowing won't make it any better. You say you are weak, but I don't think you are so weak as all that. And there is one thing I have wanted to say to you of late. You will pardon me if it seems intrusive. But, do you know you are behaving very coldly, and, I think, unwisely, towards your husband? You leave him alone, to other temptations that your presence would restrain. All these months you have not seen him, you scarcely even

write with more warmth or interest than you do to your steward; and, after all, *he* is your husband. Nothing can alter that; and he loved you very dearly, and no doubt he does still. Can you not see that your duty to him demands even more than the sacrifice you have already made? I know it is hard, terribly hard. You say there is no sympathy, no comprehension between you, and your heart is aching with this forbidden love, and he must seem in a way hateful; but you were not honest with him quite, if you promised to marry him, and yet held back your heart. You see what I mean?"

"Yes," Lauraine says faintly, "I see."

"Duty demands much, but it also repays much," continues Lady Etwynde gently. "Heaven knows I am not fit to preach to you; but in the world, as we know it, Lauraine, there are so many faithless wives, so many divided households. Oh, my dear, don't you add to the number! You have many enemies of whom you know nothing, and they would gladly seize your name, and smirch its purity with scandals, and whispers, and evil words. I want you to be brave, and face them all, and live out your life nobly and well. I know I am bidding you do a hard thing; but it is right, and I am sure you see it."

Lauraine bends her head down wearily, and lays it on her friend's shoulder. She feels spent, tired, exhausted. The tears throng to her eyes, her heart aches with dull and ceaseless pain. "I do see it!" she half sobs. "I will try."

"May Heaven give you strength!" murmurs Lady Etwynde, and she kisses her on the brow.

CHAPTER XVIII

It seems strange and painful to Lauraine to go back to the gaiety and brilliance of Baden after the quiet and rest of pretty, picturesque little Bingen.

A large party of her old friends and acquaintances are at the Badischer Hof, and her husband meets her at

the station. Lady Etwynde has returned to England.

"You are not looking well," says Sir Francis. "And how thin you have become."

"I have not been very strong; this hot weather tries me so," she answers; and then they enter their carriage and drive to the hotel in the cool, sweet September twilight. Lauraine forces herself to talk, to try and appear interested in the forthcoming race; but the sense of strangeness produced by long absence and utter want of sympathy with each other's tastes and pursuits makes itself felt again and again. It is a relief when she finds herself alone in her own room. But with Lady Etwynde's words ringing in her ears, with her new resolves firm and close to her heart, she will not listen to whispers of distaste and discontent. She enters more into the business of her toilette than she has done since her child's death. She astonishes her maid by her critical objections. When she descends she looks like the Lauraine of old. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement, her eyes burn with feverish brilliancy. Her soft, snowy robes seem to make her beauty more fair, more young, more pathetic. The first person to greet her is the Lady Jean—Lady Jean, handsomer, if a little louder and stouter than ever, arrayed in a wonderful Louis Quatorze costume, with glittering steel buttons and ornaments. Consistent with her new *rôle*, Lauraine greets her very cordially, and even smiles with less repugnance on "Jo," who is one of her special detestations, and who looks even uglier, and more Jewish than of yore.

They are a very brilliant party assembled here, and the theme on every tongue is the coming race, and the wonderful English racer owned by Sir Francis. Lauraine wonders a little to find the women apparently as conversant with racecourse slang as the men—at the fluency with which Lady Jean discourses on "training," and "hedging," and "running form," and "hard condition." It seems so long since she was with women of this sort, women who ape the "lords of creation" in

manners, dress, and morals, that she feels bewildered and out of place amidst them all.

When dinner is over they saunter out to the Kursaal. The band is playing, the *salons* are crowded. The lights sparkle amid the trees, and fall on fair faces and lovely toilettes, on sovereigns of the *demi-monde*, supreme and defiant; on other sovereigns and celebrities, quite unobtrusive, undistinguished. They mingle with the crowd. Lady Jean, Sir Francis, and Lauraine are walking on a little in advance of the others. A fountain is throwing up showers of silver spray, the white gleam of a statue shines through the foliage; on the chairs beneath the trees two people are sitting—a man and a woman.

The light falls on her face: it is very lovely, though owing much to art. Her hair is of too vivid a gold to be quite natural; the great grey eyes are swept by lashes many shades darker than their original hue. She is talking and laughing loudly. The man leans carelessly back on his seat, tilting it to an angle that threatens its upset and his own. Perhaps it is that fact, reminding her so of a trick of Keith's, that makes Lauraine look a second time. Her heart gives a wild throb, she feels cold and sick with a sudden shame.

She sees it is Keith himself. . . .

Just as they pass, the tilted chair is pulled back to its level with a ringing laugh.

"I declare to you it's impossible to speak when you will not look," says a shrill French voice.

His eyes go straight to that passing figure. He starts, and his face grows darkly red. The eyes meet for a second's space. In hers is pained rebuke, in his—shame. There is no word, no sign of recognition. But all the night seems full of dizzy pain to Keith.

"It is very annoying," murmurs Lady Jean the next morning, as she sits at the breakfast-table. "Why could they not have gone somewhere else?"

"What is annoying?" questions Lauraine, looking

up from her chicken cutlets at the clouded, handsome face opposite.

"Why, those Americans; one meets them everywhere! Hortense tells me they arrived last night—that Woollffe woman, you know, and her niece; and they have the next rooms to mine; and, of course, we will meet them everywhere; and oh! I am so sick of them, you can't imagine!"

"Mrs. Woollffe is a very kind-hearted woman," murmurs Lauraine. She is pale and languid, and her eyes have a weary, sleepless look in them that tells of many hours of wakefulness. She and Lady Jean are alone.

"Kind-hearted!" echoes Lady Jean. "My dear, so is our greengrocer's wife, or our dressmaker, for all we know; but that is no reason why we should receive them in our drawing-rooms. Now, I have done my best to avoid this dreadful woman, for two seasons, and here she is, next door to me!"

"You are not bound to associate with her, if you are so exclusive," says Lauraine, a little contemptuously. "But there are many women received in society who have not half the honesty and sterling worth of Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe."

"Of course," laughs Lady Jean, with unfeigned amusement; "but honesty and sterling worth are rather humdrum things, don't you think? And she is *so* vulgar!"

"That should be a recommendation, I fancy," says Lauraine. "Almost every one is vulgar nowadays."

"Ah, but there is a distinction! When a woman is really well born, and has an established position, she may do what she likes. It is these mushroom millionaires, these *nouveaux riches*, with their lined pockets and their 'piles,' made out of every imaginable horror, adulterating, swindling, coal-mining, shoe-blacking, heaven only knows what, that are so odious and yet so formidable a power! They push, they struggle, they scheme, they spend their money like water, they have a craze for society, the very highest, the very best. They take our

snubs and insults, and flatter and fawn just the same only for a card in their halls, a half-hour passage through their drawing-rooms, the honour and glory of a 'name' to figure in a society journal as one of their guests. Faugh! it is sickening!"

"But the society who eats and drinks and amuses itself at their expense is alone to blame," says Lauraine calmly. "If people had sufficient dignity and self-respect to oppose such innovations, to keep these people at a distance, they could not force themselves in."

"But they are always so abominably rich," laughs Lady Jean. "That excuses so much, you see; and then they let us treat them pretty much as we please. It is a case of get all you want, give what you like."

"To me that always seems a very mean doctrine," says Lauraine gravely.

"Do you treat Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe as an equal, then?" asks Lady Jean ironically.

"If you mean do I know her one day and cut her the next, do I go to her balls and be blind when we pass in the Row, I must say—no. She comes to my house, I go to hers. She was extremely kind to me in Rome, and I never forget kindness. She is not very ladylike, I acknowledge, but I should be sorry to hurt her feelings because of that. I do not consider a lady can ever affect her own dignity by her behaviour to those whom society counts her inferiors. For my part I like to be consistent. If we receive such people on account of their wealth, we take them at their own valuation. We have no right to smile on them one minute and insult them the next."

"You were always peculiar," says Lady Jean, with some asperity. "I suppose that comes of high principles and poetic fancies. I always go where I can be amused myself. It is the best thing to do after all."

"To amuse oneself?" questions Lauraine. "And afterwards?"

"Oh, after that—the deluge," laughs Lady Jean,

shaking out the countless lace ruffles and frills of her cambric morning gown. I could not take life *au grand sérieux*; it would kill me. Oh, I know what you would say. Excitement is frivolous, useless, wearing to our nerves, destruction to health and beauty. Perhaps so. But you are blessed with a serene temperament; I am not. I like to live, to enjoy, to be in one whirl from morning till night. I don't care about long life, peace, tranquillity. No, I want all I can, *while* I can."

Lauraine looks at her curiously. She knows very little of Lady Jean—only just so much as one woman in society does know of another who moves in the same set, dances at the same balls, pursues the same routine of enjoyments. But she knows she is popular and admired, on good terms with the world at large, and an immense favourite with men.

"You don't agree with me, of course?" pursues Lady Jean, sipping her claret, and looking amusedly at Lauraine's grave face. "I suppose you have aims and ambitions and 'views' like your friend Lady Etwynde? What a curious thing, by the way, that she should be a friend of yours, or indeed, of anybody's except a peacock. She must be dreadfully uninteresting!"

"I think her charming," answers Lauraine. "She is one of the few true women it has been my lot to meet."

Lady Jean feels a little uncomfortable. She has long passed the stage of blushing, or she would feel the colour mounting as she meets Lauraine's calm, frank gaze.

"Is there any *arrière pensée*?" she thinks. "Is she less blind than we imagine?"

"I can't imagine a woman getting enthusiastic *about* a woman," she says coolly. "Seems unnatural. Of course, I have no doubt the æsthetic is very charming to those who can appreciate her. I never could."

"I suppose not. I should scarcely think you had much in common," answers Lauraine dryly.

"Still," says Lady Jean, rising carelessly from the table, "it was a little odd and unnatural that you should

go away with her, and leave your poor husband all to himself. If he hadn't been one of the most good-natured men——"

"Pardon me," interrupts Lauraine, very coldly, "I would rather not discuss my husband with anybody. You may rest assured I had his full sanction for my 'unnatural' conduct. And, if you know anything of a mother's feelings at all, you might suppose that I scarcely felt inclined for the gaieties and frivolities of London life after so sad a trial."

"Ah, yes; I forgot—the poor little angel," murmurs Lady Jean, her eyelids drooping to hide the angry flash in her black eyes. "But—I may be wrong—I don't know, only to me it always seemed that a wife's first duty was to her husband."

"Pray, has my husband been complaining of me?" inquires Lauraine haughtily.

Lady Jean smiles involuntarily. "My dear, no, of course not. I only said——"

"I quite understand," says Lauraine. "Perhaps I was selfish in my grief. I don't know. I had not meant to be; but he chose the world, and I, solitude. I should not be so unwise again, rest assured."

"What does she mean?" says Lady Jean to herself uncomfortably. "And how strange she looked. Surely, surely, she cannot suspect!"

An hour afterwards she is strolling with Sir Francis through the grounds of the Kursaal.

"*Mon cher*," she says, with a little mocking laugh, "I do believe your wife is jealous. It is very amusing, but you had better be careful all the same. I object to be one in a *chronique scandaleuse*."

"Lauraine jealous?" exclaims Sir Francis. "What put that idea in your head?"

"She herself," answers Lady Jean. "She says for the future she will not be so neglectful of you. She is afraid she left you too much alone. Is not that charming news? Does it not arouse very sweet emotions?"

"Don't talk folly, Jean," mutters Sir Francis savagely. "You know, or ought to know, how much I care for Lauraine. A poor, weak, milk-and-water creature. Heavens! how could I have ever fancied myself in love with her?"

"But you were, you know," says Lady Jean calmly. "Only, like all men, you deny it when your fickle fancy changes. It is always the *last* who is the only real love."

"I know well enough who is my real love, last or first," he says hoarsely; and his eyes flash bold, ardent admiration at her, under the drooping foliage of the trees.

"Hush!" she whispers, and with a warning glance around. "You must not say such words—in public!"

CHAPTER XIX

We whisper, and hint, and chuckle,
And grin at a brother's shame.

LAURAINE sees no more of Keith during the next week, but she hears from Mrs. Woollffe that he has gone to the Black Forest.

"I don't know what's come to him," complains the garrulous American. "Guess he's off his head sometimes. Those dollars have been an unlucky windfall for him. He's not like the same chap he was in New York. He never looks pleased noway, and he was the merriest, larkiest young fellow any one could wish to see when I knew him first. I thought Nan would wake him up a bit, but she don't seem to answer; and now he's run off from Baden-Baden as if it was a den of rattlesnakes; and they do say (she drops her voice mysteriously) that he's with that notorious Frenchwoman Coralie Lafitte. My word, if that's so, won't she make the dollars fly. All the same, I'm uncommon sorry for Keith. Never thought he was one of *that* sort."

Lauraine grows hot and cold with shame as she listens. She had thought there would be nothing harder for her to do after giving him up, after that last sad parting; but

to hear of his recklessness, his sins, to know that she may be in a measure to blame for both cuts her to the heart.

She sits quite silent, her hands busy with some crewel-work that she is doing. Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe is paying her a morning visit. Lady Jean has fled at the first approach of the enemy, and so Lauraine has to entertain her alone. Mrs. Woollffe talks on, on; but her listener hears nothing of what she says. Her thoughts are only with the man whose life she has wrecked. Her storm-shattered heart aches and throbs with memories freshly brought to life. She has done what was right; she has severed her life from his, but if it makes him evil, desperate, hopeless; if it sends him to profligate men and bad women, if his bright young manhood is laid waste and desolate, was it, could it be right, after all?

Her influence, her presence, had always been a restraint upon him, and she had denied him both—cast him out to the fire of temptations, the recklessness of despair.

It was a horrible thought; no one knows how horrible save a woman whose soul is pure, whose heart is passionate, who sees the life she loves and fain would bless, pass out and away from her keeping, and knows that it is beyond her power to recall or claim its fidelity; who sees it lose itself in evil, and seek forgetfulness in wild and feverish excitements, and knows that a word, one little word might have held it back and kept it safe and unharmed.

"I must not think of it, I *must* not," she says to herself in scorn; and she looks up from the tangled crewels and tries to interest herself in Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe's gossip, and promises to drive with her in the Lichtenthal Allée, forgetful of Lady Jean's disgust.

"Well, I'll go," says her loquacious friend at last. "Guess I've got heaps of shopping to do this morning, and Nan will be that cross for keeping her waiting! Good-bye, my dear; good-bye. Hope I haven't tired you. Four o'clock then."

The door closes; Lauraine is alone. She sinks wearily

back in her chair. The silks and canvas fall unheeded to the floor. She is afraid of this new pain that has come to her—this jealous hatred and horror of the woman who is holding Keith in her evil bondage. Her strength seems all fled. The long, empty, colourless days that stretch before her, that have to be lived through, look doubly dreary in this hour. "I thought the worst bitterness of my cup had passed my lips," she moans. "I had not thought of this."

Her husband had asked her carelessly about Keith, and she had spoken of that brief meeting in the Tyrolean valley. Sir Francis had not heard of his being at Baden at all. A sort of dread comes over her as she thinks of the chance of other meetings, of the added pain that each fresh account of his actions may bring her. He had, indeed, known how to make her suffer, and the suffering could have no anodyne now.

With an effort she calms herself at last. Her hours of solitude are few, and she must appear her usual calm, grave self to the friends who are about and with her daily life. They see no change in her to-day. Even Lady Jean's sharp eyes detect no difference; but the laughter, the chatter, the gay banter, the naughty stories, all seem dull and far-off to her ears. She marvels whether these men and women have hearts to feel, or souls to suffer?

It is the day of the race. A day warm and brilliant with sunshine, cooled by a fresh soft breeze, that brings all the scents of the pine forests in its breath, and stirs the fluttering laces and ribbons of the women's toilettes, and the waving flags that stream from the Pavilion and the Grand Stand and other points of vantage.

Lady Jean and her husband, Sir Francis and Lauraine, come in the same carriage. As the ladies descend and sweep along the pretty grass-covered course they come face to face with Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe, her niece, and Keith Athelstone.

Lady Jean's presence gives Lauraine fair excuse

They only exchange bows and pass on. She marvels that she feels so calm, that neither flush nor pallor betrays what the sight of that young, haggard, weary face is to her. She is annoyed to see him here, having heard no word from his staunch ally. Afraid of a second meeting, she begs her husband to take her to her seat. Lady Jean grumbles, but the men are eager to be off to the enclosure, where the hero of the day, Aldebert, is calmly awaiting the important moment when he is to make or mar the fortunes of those who support him.

"You have no bets on?" says Lady Jean to Lauraine, as they sit side by side, and survey the glittering scene, all life and light and colour now.

"No, not even a solitary pair of gloves," smiles Lauraine. "To tell you the truth, I never thought about it. Betting seems stupid."

"You appear to think most things stupid that other women do," says Lady Jean tartly. She has a great deal more than gloves on this race, and Lauraine's speech annoys her. "Good gracious! here comes that awful woman again. Lauraine, you must change places; let me get on your other side. I should positively die if I had to sit next her for a quarter of an hour."

She rises impulsively from her seat. Lauraine does the same. There is a little bustle, a little laughter, a chatter of tongues, and then Lauraine finds herself with Keith Athelstone, instead of Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe, by her side.

It is impossible to avoid shaking hands with him now, and she does so. Neither of them speaks, however; but the constraint is not noticed by the rest of the party, for the horses are coming out of the enclosure now, and every eye turns to the starting point.

Aldebert wins the race; but to Lauraine everything seems confused and indistinct, and in comparison with Lady Jean's excitement and delight at Sir Francis' success, her own manner seems strangely cold and unconcerned. Amidst the hubbub and excitement, the

noise of voices and shouts of congratulation, Keith bends nearer to Lauraine.

"I have some news that will please you, I hope," he says. "I am going to marry Nan, as you advised me."

For one startled instant Lauraine is quite unable to speak or move. She feels the hot blood surging to her brain; she turns dizzy and faint. But the importance of self-command is present to her mind. She forces herself to appear as little moved as possible. Her voice is perfectly calm as she says: "I am glad to hear it. Pray accept my congratulations."

And then Sir Francis joins them, and there are more congratulations and a great deal of noise and excitement, and Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe and her party leave the stand and go down to the pretty racecourse, and Lauraine sees Keith by the side of Miss Anastasia J. Jefferson, and wonders is she dreaming—is all this real? For her the gay scene is altogether dull and wearisome. Turn where she will, look where she may, she only sees that haggard young face, only hears the shrill, ringing laugh of the pretty American, whom every one calls "Dresden China," and who looks like a dainty little Watteau shepherdess in her flowered silk costume and big hat, and piled up sunny curls.

Long before the close of that day the news is on every tongue. The young millionaire is going to marry "Dresden China," and Lady Jean looks maliciously at Lauraine, and laughs and nods her head mysteriously, saying she'll believe it when she sees it.

"Too sudden to be much good," she says, as they discuss the event that evening at dinner. "Though she's been spoons on him for ever so long."

"She's awfully pretty," remarks Sir Francis. "Why shouldn't he care for her?"

"No reason why he shouldn't. I only say he doesn't," answers Lady Jean.

"So much the better," says an *attaché* to the Austrian Legation, who makes one of the party. "Love matches

are a mistake. Never yet knew one turn out well."

"Poor Keith," says Lady Jean. "Fancy tied to those dreadful people. Her father sold rum and molasses, didn't he, in New Orleans; and she says 'guess,' and 'spry,' and 'cunning.' And then the aunt."

"I don't think their colloquialisms are worse than our slang," says Lauraine coldly.

"Oh, I know you are enthusiastic on American subjects," says Lady Jean meaningly. "I beg your pardon for my remarks."

"There is no necessity," Lauraine answers, looking at her with calm surprise. "I know you dislike Mrs. Woollffe, and of course you are not bound to acknowledge her niece——"

"As Mrs. Athelstone," interrupts Lady Jean. "No, I suppose not—only for Keith's sake——"

She pauses. Lauraine feels the colour mounting to her brow. There is something so irritating in this patronage and she knows that Lady Jean is about the last person who ought to talk of a *mésalliance.*

"I thought you said just now that she would never be that," she says very coldly. "Your words and opinions seem somewhat inconsistent."

"I shall be very much surprised if she ever is," responds Lady Jean. "All the same, one ought to prepare for the worst."

Good-humoured as is her speech, light as is her laughter, Lauraine feels that there is a covert meaning in both

She would have known she was right could she have heard the conversation between Sir Francis and herself later on that evening. After the fatigue of the drive to Iffezheim and the excitement of the races the whole party profess to be too tired for anything but a quiet evening of "loo," mingled with music and gossip and cigarettes. Then Sir Francis saunters over to where Lady Jean sits—her dark, picturesque beauty looking its best in the mellow lamp-light.

"What did you mean to-night by your remarks about young Athelstone?" he asks abruptly.

Lady Jean gives him one quick glance of her flashing eyes. "Mean? nothing, of course. What *should* I mean?"

"That's just what I want to know. You don't think he cares for this girl?"

"Not the value of a brass farthing!"

"But you think——!"

"My dear old donkey, I *think*—of course I think. I keep my eyes open, which you don't. I know a little sum in arithmetic called two and two, which you, I dare say, have long forgotten. That is all."

"I wish I knew what you were driving at," mutters Sir Francis sulkily.

"What should I be 'driving at'?" asks Lady Jean innocently. "Only when a young man has been entirely devoted to one woman, and then without rhyme or reason suddenly proposes to another for whom he doesn't care a straw, then—well, the little sum in arithmetic comes in useful. That is all."

Sir Francis looks at her half in anger, half in perplexity.

"That's the devil of women," he says with impatience. "They hint and hint, and won't speak out."

"And that's the—ahem—of men," laughs Lady Jean. "They see, and see, and remain so blind."

"I have seen nothing."

"So much the better for you," says Lady Jean, with a shrug of her handsome shoulders. "You might have been annoyed, or uncomfortable; most likely the latter. You have not my secret of taking things lightly. Now, if I saw you making love under my very eyes I should only be amused, or think what bad taste you had to prefer any other woman to me. *On se console toujours, mon ami.* You do it one way, Lauraine another, I another. But I suppose we each have our own views on the subject of the consolation, or—consoler!"

And she laughs again: soft, amused, pleasant laughter, that seems to hold no malice, to be the outspring of no

evil thought. And all the time her heart is full of both. For, as virtue shames vice, and purity shows up the grosser contrast of immorality, so she feels ashamed and rebuked by the words and presence of Lauraine. "If ever two people loved, they love," she had said to herself that past season; and now it had all come to nothing. There was no hold over Lauraine, no *petite histoire*, nothing to smile and sneer at.

"If she had only compromised herself ever so little," she thinks to-night as she looks at the lovely calm face, the grave dark eyes. "And now this projected marriage. It is awfully queer. If she had been like other women."

CHAPTER XX

"THE old place is just the same, isn't it?" says one tall bearded man to another, as they stand at the window of the Naval and Military Club, and look out at the lighted streets in the grey November dusk.

The man addressed turns his keen dark eyes on his companion's face. "The same—yes, I suppose it is. It's only people who change, you know. Places and things haven't their excuse."

"Well, changed or not, I'm glad to be back again," says Major Trentermain of the Twelfth. He and his friend, Colonel Carlisle, have just returned from Burmah, and are enjoying the comforts of club-life, the reunion with old friends, the hundred-and-one things that, familiar enough once, have become of double value since sacrificed for the exigencies of foreign service, and lost through years of hard work and fierce warfare, and the myriad discomforts of climate and life abroad.

"London is the best place in the world to enjoy life in," continues Trentermain. "I've been looking up old friends to-day. Such welcomes! Didn't expect to find so many in town. But the country's beastly just now; even the hunting's spoilt by the weather."

"Old friends," echoes his companion drearily.

"I wonder if I've got any left. I feel like a Methuselah come back; it seems a lifetime since I went abroad."

He passes his hand over his short-cut iron-grey hair, and half sighs. He is a splendid-looking man. Tall, erect, powerful, with keen dark eyes and a heavy drooping moustache, dark still in contrast to his hair—a man who carries his forty-five years lightly enough, despite hard service and trying climate. His eyes gaze out on the darkening streets, where the lamps are shining, and his thoughts go back to some thirteen years before, to a time of fierce joy and fiercer suffering.

"I wonder where *she* is now?" he thinks to himself. "Pshaw! married, of course, long ago. I wonder I have not forgotten her. Thirteen years of such a life as mine ought to knock all memories and romance out of one."

He laughs a little bitterly and impatiently, and then plunges into a discussion with his friend, which resolves itself into an arrangement to dine and go to the theatre together afterwards.

"I have promised to look in at Vane's rooms," says Major Trentermain. "You'll come too, won't you? He is full of some new craze—æstheticism, he calls it. All his people have gone in for it extensively, and he seems to be bitten with the same mania. You really should see his rooms. Quite a study."

"Oh, yes; I'll come," answers Carlisle indifferently. He is rarely anything else but indifferent now. Nothing rouses or interests him except, perhaps, "big game" or hard fighting.

They go to the Gaiety. To Carlisle the performance seems idiotic in the extreme.

"Do come away. I can't stand this trash," he mutters impatiently.

"But that's Belle Burton singing," remonstrates Trentermain, who is more "up" to the goings on of London as it is, than his friend.

"What of that?" demands Carlisle.

"Every one's talking of her. She's——" (Then

comes a mysterious whisper.) Colonel Carlisle frowns and tugs his heavy moustache.

"Vice idealized as 'celebrity.' Umph! That's a modern definition? Suppose I'm old-fashioned enough to look upon it as it is. Come, you can't really care for such rubbish, Trent. It's an insult to common sense, I think. And look at that row of vapid idiots grinning from ear to ear—boys with the *blasé* faces of men, and limbs like thread-paper. Fine stuff for soldiers there!"

"That's a detachment of the Crutch and Toothpick Brigade," laughs Trentermain; "also a new importation of society since we bade farewell to Albion's shores. British youth don't seem to have much backbone, eh?"

They laugh and rise and go out, to the intense disgust of a bevy of fair ones who have been directing Parthian glances at the two magnificent-looking men in the stalls, and drawing comparisons between them and the "Brigade" in no way complimentary to the latter.

Once free of the theatre, they hail a hansom and are driven to the rooms of Valentine Vane, an old comrade of their own who has retired from the service, and is cultivating artistic tastes with praiseworthy assiduity.

But Valentine Vane, or V. V., as his friends call him, is in a state of pleasant excitement. He has been invited to a reception at the house of one of the most famous leaders of the new school, and he insists upon carrying the two officers off with him despite their remonstrances.

"She bade me bring any friend I pleased," he says enthusiastically. "Ah, when you see her! Such grace, such languor, such divine indolence! Every attitude a poem; every look a revelation of subtle meaning! Ah!"

"Sounds serpentine, I think," says Carlisle, *sotto voce*. "Gives you the impression of a snake gliding about. Can't say I appreciate the prospect."

"Of course you are as yet Philistines," continues V. V., pouring some scent over his handkerchief as he speaks, and gently waving the delicate cambric to disperse the fragrance. "Ah, you have much to learn!"

"My dear fellow," says Carlisle good-humouredly, "do shut up that nonsense, and talk rationally."

"Rational?" echoes Vane, in surprise. "Am I not that? What is there irrational in finding delight in all that is beautiful, in wishing to be surrounded by sweet sounds and fair objects, in striving to revive the glories of the Hellenic age in worshipping Art as the glorious and ennobling thing it is?"

"I am not going to say anything against art," answers Colonel Carlisle; "but I don't think there is anything of the Greek type about Englishmen, either physically or intellectually, leaving out of the question the depressing influences of climate."

"Ah!" sighs Vane pityingly. "It is all new and strange to you. Æstheticism, as interpreted by modern hierophants, is, of course, essentially different from the Hellenic school; but its aim and object is the same—to beautify the common things of life, to ennoble the soul, as well as please the eye and elevate the senses."

"Well, I am not sufficiently up in the subject to understand or argue about it," laughed the Colonel. "Perhaps after to-night——"

"Ah, yes! Wait till you see *her*!" cries Vane enthusiastically. "She who has converts by the hundred, whose intellect is as beautiful as the body which is its temple; to whom not only the worship but the perception of art is a natural and exquisite impulse; whose grace, whose mind, whose movements——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake spare me any more 'serpentine' descriptions!" entreats Carlisle. "I am quite ready to believe in this wonderful high priestess of yours. Is she anything like Ellen Terry?"

"Ellen Terry is sublime also," says Vane rebukingly. "There's not another actress on the stage could walk in those clinging draperies of hers. Is she not a poem?"

"She *acted* one," says the Colonel dryly. "I saw her in 'The Cup.' I am not educated up to the appreciation of subtleties yet."

"I have met at least a dozen fair-haired girls who have all told me they were considered 'so like Ellen Terry,'" puts in Trentermain. "I began to think she must be a 'priestess' also."

"Ah, there are a good many changes since I was in London last," says the Colonel. "But there, I see you are impatient to be off. You—you don't mean to say you are going to wear *that* flower, Vane?"

He points to a gardenia in his button-hole as he speaks.

"Yes; why not?" demands his friend in surprise.

"Oh! I thought the sunflower or the lily was only admissible," says Carlisle gravely. "I was going to ask if it would be possible to procure one each for Trent and myself before entering the Temple of Art and Æstheticism."

It is simply out of idle curiosity that Carlisle has accompanied Vane and Trentermain. He expects to be terribly bored; but when they alight at the famous house in Kensington, and everywhere he sees the delicate subdued hues, the softly-shaded lights, the gracefully-arranged ferns and shrubs and hot-house blossoms, the artistic yet suitable dresses of the attendants, who move about so unobtrusively (there is not a man-servant anywhere), the strange hush and quietude, broken by no loud voices or discordant laughter, he begins to think the new school is not so bad after all.

"And now for the priestess," he says in a whisper to Trent, as they follow their friend from the tea-room, which is simply a gem. His tall figure passes through the curtained doorway. A light like moonlight fills all the room into which he enters. His head towers above Vane's, and straight before him he sees a woman with a halo of golden hair loose about her brow, with a soft, languid, serious smile, with——

Their eyes meet. After thirteen long years of absence and separation, Cyril Carlisle finds himself once again in the presence of the only woman he has ever really loved.

"Colonel Carlisle, Lady Etwynde Fitz-Herbert."

He bends over her hand as she gives it. In that moment she is calmer, more self-possessed than himself.

"I—I hope—I beg," he stammers confusedly. "I mean, I had no idea when Vane asked me to come here that I should find myself in *your* house."

"You are very welcome," she says, and the low, tender music of her voice thrills him with an exquisite pain. "I—I saw your regiment had returned. You have been away a great many years."

"A great many," he answers, his eyes sweeping over the lovely face and figure of the queenly woman, who is so like and yet so different to the radiant, happy girl he had left.

"You—you are very little altered," she says presently, and the great fan of peacock's feathers in her hand trembles as she meets his glance.

"Am I?" he says bitterly. "I should have thought the reverse; I feel changed enough, Heaven knows."

She is silent. Her heart is beating fast, the colour comes and goes in her face. She is thinking how glad she is she did not put on that terra-cotta gown with its huge puffs and frills, but discarded it at the last moment for this soft creamy robe of Indian silk, that seems to float about her like a mist, and show all the lovely curves of her perfect figure as she moves or stands. Cyril Carlisle thinks her more lovely than ever. The old pain so long buried and fought against comes back all too vividly. He knows he has never forgotten, never ceased to love this woman; but she—how calm, how changed she is! Again, as in the past, comes back the thought of all his love for her had meant, of all they might have been but for his own folly, his own sin.

"A man's passions are ever their own Nemesis," he thinks wearily, and then her voice falls on his ear again. She is introducing him to some one. A limp and lack-lustre "damosel," as she loves to be called, attired in pale sage-green that makes him bilious to comtemplate; and he is fain to give this maiden his arm, and conduct her

through the rooms, and listen to her monotonous tattle of art jargon, which seems to him the most idiotic compound of nonsense and ignorance ever filtered through the lips of a woman—and he has heard a good deal.

His thoughts will go back to this strange meeting. She is not married, she is free still. Was it faithfulness to him, or—— He thrusts the thought aside contemptuously. What folly it seems! What woman *could* remember for thirteen years? Besides, had they not parted in anger? Had she not cast him aside with contempt and fierce scorn, and bitter words that had stabbed him to the heart?

He roams about the beautiful rooms. He hears her name on every tongue. He knows that men of science and learning are here—men of note in the highest circles of art and literature. He is glad that her tastes are so pure and elevated, glad that he does not find her a mere woman of fashion, a frivolous nonentity. Again and again he finds himself watching that fair, serene face, that exquisite figure, which is a living embodiment of grace that may well drive all women desperate with envy.

How calm she is! How passionless, how changed! Men speak of her beauty, the beauty that lends itself so perfectly to this fantastic fashion of which all her guests seem devotees, and the words turn his blood to fire. Yet, after all, why should he mind? She is nothing to him—nothing. He is beside her again. She does not appear to notice his presence, but she is well enough aware of it. It lends warmth and colour and animation to her face, it lights her great grey eyes, and brings smiles to her lips. His heart grows bitter within him. She must have long ago grown callous and forgotten. Does she really forget how passionately she loved him once! Does she think of him no more than if he were the veriest stranger in her crowded rooms? Has she ever wept, prayed, suffered for him?

God help us, men and women both, if we could not in some way mask our faces and conceal our feelings!

Because the world sees no tears in our eyes it does not follow they are never shed; because there are smiles on our lips it is not a necessity that our hearts are without suffering. When the curtain is down, when the theatre is empty and dark, then, perhaps, the real play begins; the play that no audience sees, that is only acted out to our own breaking, beating hearts, unsuspected and unknown to the world around!

CHAPTER XXI

THE crowd has lessened; the rooms are thinning now. A great actor stands up to give a recitation. He selects one of Browning's poems. Lady Etwynde, having heard it often before, withdraws into one of the smaller rooms, a dainty little place, with the exquisite colouring and artistic finish of a cameo, and with only that sort of moonlight haze shed about it that she loves so much better than the garish brilliancy of gas, or candles.

To this retreat saunters also the figure, on whose tall magnificent proportions even the eyes of the feminine æsthetes have rested with an admiration contrary to all the tenets of their school.

He seats himself beside Lady Etwynde.

"What a charming retreat," he says softly. "Do you know I wish you would give me a little information about this 'æstheticism,' of which you seem a high priestess? I confess I feel quite bewildered."

She smiles. She does not look up.

"Yes, I suppose it is new to you," she answers. "The worst of it is that, like all new doctrines, it is being ruined by exaggeration. Genuine æstheticism is, as of course you know, the science of beauty, and its true perception and pursuit. Our school has its canons, its doctrines, its schemes and projects, on which oceans of ridicule have been poured and yet left it unharmed. It has done much good; it has taught the poetry of colour and

arrangement to a class whose dress and abodes were simply appalling to people of taste. If you have ever suffered from the gilded abominations of a millionaire's drawing-room——"

Colonel Carlisle moves a little impatiently.

"But is this craze to regulate our lives, to be the great 'all' of our existence? Are men and women to go about long-haired, straight-gowned, tousled; jabbering 'intense' nonsense and gushing over blue china and sunflowers; and is such an existence considered elevating, manly, or useful? To me it seems as if I were looking on at a pantomime."

"You are not educated yet," says Lady Etwynde, with a demure smile. "Everything new has, of course, its opponents. You have read Plato?"

"When I was at school," answers the Colonel.

"Ah!" sighs Lady Etwynde. "And you have forgotten all he says about artistic excellence and beauty; the relations of all physical and moral and intellectual life to what is most perfect and intelligent; how life should be filled with grace and dignity, the mind cultured to its utmost capability, the body beautified by vital activity and ennobled by a healthy and carefully taught appreciation of all that is conducive to physical and mental prefection."

"Has it taken you thirteen years to learn all this?" asks Colonel Carlisle softly, as he leans forward and looks into her eyes in the silver haze of the lamplight.

She starts a little.

"You think I am so—changed?" she says, in her natural voice, and discarding aesthetic languor.

"I think you are ten thousand times more beautiful, more captivating, than when I knew you first. But —changed? Well, yes. Is your life devoted only to the study of the Beautiful now?"

She colours softly.

"I think you do not quite understand," she says. "When a woman's life is empty, something she must do

to fill up the void. And I do not think this pursuit is so very foolish as you seem to suppose."

"Only that John Bull has not much of the Hellenic type about him," says the Colonel, *sotto voce.*

"You see," she goes on, with sweet gravity, "moral beauty and physical beauty have each their worshippers. We would weld the two together, and so glorify art, literature, mind, physique—all that is about and around our daily lives. But, as I said before, like all new creeds, it is spoiled by the over-zealous, exaggerated by the foolish, ridiculed by the surface judges. It is not the cultivation of one thing only, but the cultivation of all that real æsthetics would teach; leading, subduing, elevating the spiritual and poetic capacity of our nature, and subordinating the crude and material."

"That sounds more sensible," says Colonel Carlisle. "But when I heard in your rooms of symphonies of colour, and 'tones' of harmony, and worship of some special make of china, and 'living up' to peacocks' fans and feathers, I confess I thought the people were all lunatics, to say the least of it, and marvelled how you could have shared in such a lamentable creed and become a priestess of 'High Art,' as interpreted by terra-cotta gowns, sage-green furniture, and old china which seems to convert modern drawing-rooms into a memory of kitchen dressers. Life may be full of emotions and 'thrills,' as I heard a long-haired youth explaining in a dying voice, but such life as this seemed to me, I must confess, a series of absurdities such as no sensible mind could entertain."

"Those are the zealots and the exaggerators," smiles Lady Etwynde amusedly. "They have spoilt much by carrying into extremes what is only tolerable in moderation; by dragging in without warning what really requires delicate and gradual preparation."

"I am glad that you are only moderate then," says her companion. "Some one once said that there was a sphinx in our souls who was perpetually asking us

riddles. I confess I thought there was one in mine when I met you to-night under such changed auspices."

"And what was the riddle?" asks Lady Etwynde.

He bends a little closer. "The *reason*, of course! You told me a few moments ago that when a woman's life was empty she must do something to fill up the void. Was yours so empty?"

It is a bold question; he wonders he has dared ask it. She turns pale with—anger. Of course it is anger, and her eyes are flashing under their long lashes, and words won't come because her heart is hot and indignant. So he interprets her silence and murmurs apologetically: "Forgive me; I had no right to make such a remark; only, I have been such a miserable man since you sent me from your side, that it seemed in some way to console me that you had not been quite—happy, either."

"I suppose no one is that," she says, with a suspicious tremor in her voice. "Something, or some one, is sure to spoil our lives for us."

He draws back. The shaft has hit home. He remembers only too well who has spoilt the life of this woman beside him.

"Society is too artificial to content me," she goes on rapidly. "I want something more than amusement. I like to think. I like rational conversation. I like art, little as I can study or understand its great teachings. I like all that elevates the mind, and is beautiful to the senses; so I plunged headlong into the new school, and it has interested and occupied me. Do not suppose I consider it perfect by any means; but it has done much good—it will do more. If you were interested in such things you might remember the glaring colours, the brilliant hues that made one's eyes ache not so very long ago. Look what lovely shades and tints we have now. Women required to be educated to some sense of colour and fitness. However plain or insignificant we may be, we may at least make our defects less oppressive by taste and culture."

"There I quite agree with you," says Colonel Carlisle, wondering a little how she manages always to evade personal topics and glide back to the keynote of their conversation. "But you lack neither taste nor culture; your words apply to quite a different class of persons. And if æsthetics teach taste and appreciation of all that is beautiful and cultured, why, in Heaven's name, do these people make such guys of themselves?"

"I have told you twice already that every creed has its exaggerators."

"This creed seems to have more than its share then," he says amusedly. "Your rooms are perfection, I allow—your toilette is like a Greek poet's dream; but I confess I see no other like it."

"You are very kind to say so," she murmurs, with an inward congratulation that fate had saved her from the terra-cotta gown which, in a fit of "exaggeration," she had ordered. "But I wanted to ask you about yourself. Our conversation seems very one-sided. Have you returned to England for good?"

"I don't know," he says, somewhat embarrassed. "It will depend on one or two things. I don't know if I am quite fit for civilized life again. It seems to want the air, the freedom, the unconventionality, the long nights spent under no roof but heaven's, the excitement of sport that may mean death at any moment, the thrill of danger, the hazard of battle—thirteen years of such a life make one rather impatient of your effeminate doctrines, don't you think?"

"Yes," she says, with a little soft thrill at her heart at the ring of the manly voice, at the look in the dark, fearless eyes; "I suppose it does. But there is no need for you to follow the creed. I was only explaining."

"And I don't seem to have heard half enough about it," he answers seriously. "What, are you going?"

"I must," she says, rising from her seat. "The recitation is over. What a pity you did not listen. Don't you like Browning?"

"I might if I could understand him," says the Colonel, rising also and looking somewhat disturbed at the interruption to their conversation. "I always sympathize with that unfortunate man in 'The Golden Butterfly'; do you remember? The American who sits up all night to study Browning's works because he expects him to dinner."

Lady Etwynde laughs.

"Yes, poor fellow, and he set himself such an easy task. He meant to read through the *whole* collection in the course of one evening. Though Americans pride themselves on doing 'big things,' I fancy that was rather beyond him. By the way, do you like Americans? I will introduce you to a charming girl if you do, and she is not one of the æsthetic school, so you needn't be alarmed that she will afflict you with 'art jargon.'"

"I shall be very happy," murmured the Colonel, "only, really——"

"Oh, no excuses," says Lady Etwynde. "There she is, that pretty girl opposite. You musn't make love to her, though, for she is engaged. Her *fiancé* is not here to-night. That is her aunt beside her; she is quite a character in her way."

Colonel Carlisle feels no ambition to be introduced either to the "beauty" or the character, but he does not like to say so, and he is soon bowing before the radiant little figure of "Dresden China." She looks at him with undisguised admiration. The "big man" has attracted the attention of most feminine eyes to-night—all the more perhaps because he looks so indifferent, so bored, so unadmiring.

Pretty and bewitching as "Dresden China" is, the Colonel seems to feel no inclination to pay her compliments. He stands and listens to her chatter with the sort of amused indulgence he would bestow on any pretty girl. He thinks what a pity the American twang is so strong, and how vulgar is the aunt, and marvels what the *fiancé* is like, and why he is not now beside his lady-love.

And all the time he cannot keep his restless glance from following the floating movements of that graceful figure in her creamy draperies of Indian silk. His heart echoes the poet's words unconsciously:

There is none like her—none!

"What would I not give to know if she remembers still?" he says to himself. "But I am a fool to imagine it possible. Why should she? and how could she forgive the old sin now any more than in her young, passionate, romantic girlhood? And yet—oh, my darling, if life has taught you wisdom, you must surely know that love has nothing to do with the soulless follies in which men find beguilement, nor is there one thing on earth they loathe so utterly as an unworthy passion, whose pursuit has been base, whose conquest wearied almost as soon as achieved, whose every memory is a sting that shames them, and from which their better nature recoils even in thought, once the evil glamour is over."

But he did not know—how should he?—that it is just of that evil glamour a woman's heart is jealous.

When Lady Etwynde had loved him, she had been almost a child—young, fresh, innocent, pure. She had abandoned herself to that love without thought or analysis. She had worshipped him as the noblest, truest of God's creatures; she had thought that to him she was all in all. No cloud had crossed the sky, no sound disturbed the illusion; in its innocence and depth and peace, her love had been in its way as perfect as it was beautiful; and then suddenly, without warning or preparation of any sort, she had learnt that she was deceived.

Had she known more of the world, had she been in any way less innocent of mind and thought, she would have known better than to expect so much as she had expected. She would have learnt the lesson all women have to learn, that their love must accept the evil of a man's past as well as the good of his future, giving a simple fidelity

that asks no questions, and takes just what—remains.

But she had not known. Her dreams had been rudely broken ; her faith as rudely shaken. Angered, outraged, shamed, she had been stung to the fierceness of jealous anger, and her love had looked debased in her sight as in his own, because of the falsehoods told and credited.

How could she judge of the emptiness and weariness of a dead passion that he had only longed to forget, that he dared not breathe to her pure young ears ? How should she reck of the soulless bondage from which he thought himself free ? She had been so proud, that his excuses looked paltry to himself—an amorous infidelity that this great, pure, trusting love had shamed and shown as the debasing, selfish thing it was.

And she would hear nothing—nothing ; and in his heart he could not blame her.

" If she had loved me less she would have forgiven," he had said to himself.

" The innocence of youth is cruel, because its ideals are so lofty, its exactions so great. She thought me a hero, and now I look only a beast ! "

And he had left her. She would never forgive, he felt sure ; and all his pleas and excuses only humiliated him, and never touched her. Desperate, maddened, hating himself and his old folly, whose burden he could never in life shake off, so he had passed from her presence and her knowledge for thirteen long years. And now he stood before her again and thought of the past.

" Do tell, Colonel," says the shrill voice of the Dresden China figure beside him. " Did you ever shoot a tiger out there in India, and is it really so hot, and do the elephants come out at night and knock all the houses down, and is there nothing but curry and rice to eat, and are the ladies all yellow, and have you brought any ' punkahs ' or tigers' claws home with you, and did you know Captain Dasher of the 40th ? He went out to Burmah last year."

Colonel Carlisle rouses himself, and looks at her be-

wildered. He does not know how to begin answering her questions. Fortunately he is saved the trouble.

"Why, aunt, there's Keith!" she exclaims suddenly. "He's come after all. Excuse me, Colonel; that's the young man I'm going to marry. Will you tell him I'm sitting here, and he's to come right along at once?"

Colonel Carlisle bows, and retreats delighted.

CHAPTER XXII

To feel the arms of my true love
Round me once again!

No one has been more astonished at the news of Keith Athelstone's engagement than Lady Etwynde. It comes to her in a letter from Lauraine—a cold and strangely written letter, yet one which has caused the writer terrible pangs.

When they left Baden they had gone to Falcon's Chase, and entertained a large house party there. After Christmas Lauraine was coming to London. She was not strong, and the cold, bleak air of the north tried her severely. All this Lady Etwynde learnt by letters—letters that seemed curt and constrained—that in no way revealed anything of that inner life, those secret springs of feelings which she had learned to read and gauge in the confidences of that past summer.

She is sitting alone in her room that is like a cameo in the soft November dusk of the closing day. It is some three days since her reception and the meeting with Colonel Carlisle. She is thinking she will write and tell Lauraine about it, and then again she thinks she had better not. In this state of indecision she is disturbed by the entrance of one of the æsthetically-clad damsels of her household.

"Do you receive, my lady?" she asks, presenting her with a card.

Lady Etwynde glances at it, then blushes hotly.

"Yes," she says, turning away so that her tell-tale

face may not be noticed. She feels half ashamed, half glad. The name on the card is "Colonel Carlisle."

She is dressed to-day in olive-green velvet, with touches of old yellow lace about the throat and wrists; the golden hair is coiled loosely about her beautifully shaped head, and waves in softly tangled curls and ripples above her brow. She looks very lovely, and her visitor's eyes tell her so as he bows over her slender white hand, and murmurs conventional greeting.

"I am glad to find you at home," he says.

"It is not my day," she answers, smiling up at the tall figure. "But perhaps you won't object to that. You would have found a crowd here had it been."

"An æsthetic crowd, of course?"

"Chiefly; but I have other society as well."

"And do you live here quite alone?" he asks curiously.

"Do you mean without a sheep-dog? Oh, yes. Although I don't go in for advanced thought, I fail to see why an unmarried woman can't live by herself instead of being bored with a companion."

"And don't you find it lonely?"

"I never have time," she answers tranquilly. "My days are always fully occupied."

"And you are quite happy and—content?"

"As much as any one can be, I suppose," she says, a faint colour coming into the proud, delicate face. "I think if one has occupation and interest one can never be quite unhappy."

"And—affection?" he questions softly.

"Oh, that, of course, one does not expect," she says hurriedly. "I think a placid life is, after all, the best. It is like monotones in colour—safe, restful, even if somewhat dull."

"It sounds rather cheerless," says Colonel Carlisle gravely. "Art cannot satisfy our emotional faculties, or fill our hearts as human love and sympathy can."

"Tennyson says, 'The feelings are dangerous guides,'" she answers bitterly; "and emotion is apt to make us

capricious. As to sympathy, well, I don't think I have outlived that——"

"But love, you have?" he interrupts softly.

Her eyes meet his in startled confusion. All their ordinary calm is swept away.

"Have you any right to ask such a question?" she says coldly.

His face changes. A storm of feeling sweeps over his soul, and for a moment chains back the impetuous words he fain would utter.

"No; I have not—unless a long, faithful memory of —you gives me any right."

His voice is very low, his face pale, despite the bronzing of Indian suns. His eyes rest on her with a great sadness and a great longing in their depths. She is so much to him—this woman sitting there, with the dying daylight on her rich-hued dress, and the fire-gleams playing over the drooped golden head. So much, and he—— Oh, fool that he has been to lose her!

"I thought men's memories were never faithful," she murmurs, in answer to his last words.

"I know you judge them very harshly," he answers coldly. "I only trust that the effeminate, long-haired apostles of your new school may prove more virtuous, if less manly, than the old type."

She half smiles.

"Physical strength is always impatient of anything weak or imperfect. A man like yourself dwarfs most of our modern youth into insignificance. But there are noble souls sometimes in the feeblest bodies, just as——"

"Thank you," he says, as she hesitates; "I can quite follow your meaning, and accept it."

She flushes hotly. "Pray do not misunderstand me," she says hurriedly. "Do not suppose——"

"Oh, no," he answers, gazing back into her uplifted eyes with the ardour of past years kindling in his own. "I don't think I ever did *that*. It was you who misunderstood *me*."

"I thought—I hoped you might have forgotten," she says, in confusion.

"It is strange that I have not," he answers. "Thirteen years of such a life as mine ought to have knocked sentiment pretty well out of one. But somehow it is not easy to forget what pains one most. Joys may be soon crowded out of mind and memory; sorrows cling to us despite ourselves."

She is silent. His words fill her with a strange trouble. The past comes back again, and she sees her girlhood's hero—a hero no longer, but a man, erring, sinful, faulty, as all men and women are and will be in this troubled world. And yet now she feels she understands him better than she did in those days when she had idealized him into something grander, nobler, greater than it lay in any man's power to be.

"When I left you," he resumes presently, gaining courage to speak on in the silence of the gathering dusk, "I left all the best part of my life. You were very hard on me, but I will not say that I did not deserve it. Still, your conduct did not drive me desperate, did not make me reckless, but rather filled me with shame and sorrow to think of how far I had fallen short of your worth, your love——"

"Oh hush," she interrupts. "Do you think I am so poor and contemptible that I can listen to your words and not feel the sting of my own vanity, my childish ignorance, and stubborn pride? Why, I have never thought of my words that day without bitter shame; and you—you were too generous even to reproach me."

"I had no right to do that," he says, very gently. "I acted for the best, as I thought; I wished to spare you. You misunderstood me; that was all."

"And all these years you have—remembered me?" she says, faintly, shyly, not daring to lift her eyes to the grave, noble face.

"Yes," he says simply. "There is nothing so won-

derful in that. You were the real love of my life, though you would not believe it."

Her heart throbs quickly; the colour comes and goes in her face. She is silent for very joy, for very shame. She feels so unworthy of this great, true, steadfast love, that she so scorned once, that she had flung back at his feet in the bygone years because another had shared, or seemed to share it, before herself.

"You are not offended, I hope?" he says presently. He cannot see the tears that shine on her lashes; he only knows she is very quiet and calm, and fears that his words were too bold.

"No. Why should I be?" she says tremulously.

"You did not believe in me then," he goes on. "Not that I blame you, or indeed have ever blamed you. When a man loves a woman as I loved you, he loves her with not only admiration for her beauty, but reverence for the richer possibilities of the nature into which he has gained an insight. I knew you were proud, and pure, and true, and I knew that in all my life I should think of no other woman as I had thought of you. I was right, you see."

Again she was silent. Her heart beats so fast, its quick throbs almost frighten her, what does he mean! Can it be——

His voice breaks across the tumult of her thoughts.

"You said once you would never forgive me," he says softly. "I should not like you to know how those words troubled me: how again and again they would ring in my ears in some scene of danger, at some moment when Death and I have nearly shaken hands. At such times it seemed to me impossible that I would ever again be in your presence, or voluntarily seek it. Yet, strange to say, I have done both. Fate led me to you when I knew nothing of where I was going, and I find myself wondering if Time has softened your memory of the wrong I did you once, if ever you could find it in your heart to say the words I prayed for then, 'I forgive.'"

The tears spring to her eyes. The old remembered music of his voice seems to thrill her with joy and pain.

"Do you think me so hard, so cold?" she falters. "Long, long ago, I have forgiven!"

"And you knew I was—free?"

The warm colour sweeps over her face. Her eyes are hidden from his eager gaze.

"Yes," she says softly.

"And the past, is it all over?" he says, very low, as he leaves his chair and bends towards her. "Do you still think I willingly deceived you?"

"It would have been kinder, wiser, had you told me the truth at first," she says somewhat faintly.

In the darkness of that shadowy room, with the sense of his presence, with the rich music of his voice thrilling her heart with the long-vanished gladness of other days, she feels strangely, unutterably happy. It makes her almost afraid.

"One thing more," he says, and he kneels at her feet and draws her hands within his own. "Have art and the world and the silence of long years driven me out of your heart, for neither danger nor absence have driven *you* out of mine?"

"I told you I had not forgotten," she says, trembling greatly and growing very pale beneath this strange tumult of feeling that is so full of gladness and yet of fear.

"Forgotten—but that is not all. Do you remember the hard things you said to me when we parted? I kept back the error of my life, not because I wished to deceive you, but because I feared the truth would hurt you, and I dreaded to wound your purity and belief. Heaven knows I had suffered then, and have suffered since, enough to atone for a far greater mistake! Were I to come to you now with love as great and memory as faithful, would you, knowing what is in the past, be gentler with my folly? Could you—love—me still?"

For all answer she draws her hands from his clasp, and lays them softly round his neck, and her head sinks on

his breast. That touch, that caress, are a new and purer baptism of the love that has borne and suffered so much in the years that are dead—dead as their own pain, and laid at rest for ever now, in a grave that many tears have watered.

CHAPTER XXIII

Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre.

"My darling Lauraine," writes Lady Etwynde, sitting at the desk in her pretty morning room, "I am so happy—so happy, I don't know how to find words to tell you all about it. *He* has come back. Now you can guess the rest, can you not? For thirteen years my darling has been true; thirteen years during which I have made no sign, given no token of relenting. But it is all over and forgotten now. Once more I seem to wake and live. The old, cheerless, weary years that I have dreamt away, have lost their pain, are only full now of a soft regret that my folly delayed my happiness; for oh! how short life seems when one is glad, and the possibilities of the future seem limitless. My poor disciples are in despair, of course. I am bound to neglect them, for Cyril is a more *exigeant* lover now than in those days of old. He says too much time has been wasted, and I cannot find it in my heart to deny it. We shall be married in February, so I shall hope to have your presence. I wish you would come up soon. I am longing to see you, and your letters are so unsatisfactory. You told me Sir Francis was away. Will you come and stay with me for a few weeks? I should be more than delighted to have you, and I am sure the change would do you good. It seems a long time to wait till Christmas to see you; and we might then go down to Northumberland together. Do make up your mind and say 'Yes.' You would if you knew what pleasure it would give me."

This letter finds Lauraine in the lonely splendour of

Falcon's Chase. She reads it and a little pang of bitterness shoots through her heart. But gradually it subsides, and gives way to softer emotions.

"So Etwynde's pride had to give way at last," she says to herself, folding up the letter, and half inclined to accept its invitation. "Ah, how great a lord is love!"

Lauraine has been almost glad of the entire peace and quiet of the Chase since her guests have left it. There had been nothing but noise and excitement in it then. The Lady Jean had come thither radiant in novelties from Worth, and in highest spirits at the success of some new and gigantic speculation of "Jo's," which promised her unlimited extravagances for the season. She had been the life and soul of the party, had organized endless amusements indoors and out, and had, in fact, made herself useful to Lauraine, enchanting to Sir Francis, and popular with every one in the house. That infatuation of her husband's was still unsuspected by Lauraine. She neither noticed his devotion nor heard the hundred-and-one comments upon it that were uttered often enough, even in her presence. They were old friends—had been friends so long, it never occurred to her that there was anything more between them.

She was not acquainted with the numerous changes that society can ring out of the little simple air it calls "Platonics." She had felt grateful to Lady Jean for taking so much trouble off her own hands, for the energy and invention which had organized and carried out so much that was entertaining. It never occurred to her that her husband might be drawing comparisons between her and his friend, and those comparisons infinitely to the advantage of the latter. In accordance with her resolution, she had set herself to work to please and study him in every way, but now he no longer cared for either. He rather seemed to avoid her as much as possible, and her very gentleness and patience served to irritate him.

Her mother had been there with the rest of their guests, and her eyes had noticed with much disquietude what

Lauraine never even seemed to see. It made her seriously uneasy, and in a measure irritated her against her daughter's stupidity. "She has lost him by her own silliness, of course," she would say to herself. "Just as if a man wouldn't get bored with nothing but cold looks and dowdiness, and all the fads and fangles that Lauraine has occupied herself with lately."

Which was Mrs. Douglas' method of explaining Lauraine's grief for her child's death, and her friendship with Lady Etwynde.

It had been an intense relief to Lauraine when her guests had all departed and she was once more alone.

She had tried hard to interest herself in things that used to please him, to occupy her mind and thoughts; but the efforts seemed to grow more and more wearisome. The mind and body was at variance.

As now she sits there with Lady Etwynde's letter in her hand, she thinks it will be better after all to go up to town and leave this solitude, for which she had once yearned; and when she sees in her mirror how pale and thin she has grown she begins to think the place cannot agree with her, as every one says. Of course it is only—the place. She will not, dare not, allow that there is anything else—that the mind is preying on itself, and trying to outlive thought and banish memory, and that the struggle is too hard a one. No; that old folly is over, done with, buried, so she tells herself. Of Keith she has heard no word since they met in Baden. He may be married now, for aught she knows, and yet somehow she feels he is not —that.

"Yes, I will go," she says, at last. "The solitude and dreariness are oppressing me, and Etwynde's happiness will rouse me."

And she dashes off an immediate acceptance of the invitation, and the next day bids her maid pack her trunks, and starts for London.

Lady Etwynde is overjoyed to see her, but shocked at the change in her looks. Yet she dares not breathe

too much sympathy, or touch on the old sorrow. "Of what use?" she asks herself, "of what use now?"

Colonel Carlisle and Lauraine are mutually delighted with each other. She cannot but admire the handsome physique, the courtly, genial manners, the cultivated intelligence of this hero of her friend's; and they are so perfectly content and happy with each other, that even the most cynical disbelievers in love might acknowledge themselves converts regarding these two.

Lauraine makes a charming "propriety." She is engrossed in a book, or inventive of an errand, or just going into the other room to write a letter or try over a song, or, in fact, furnished with any amount of excuses that seem perfectly natural and innocent enough to leave the lovers to themselves.

"There will be one happy marriage among my acquaintances," she thinks to herself, as she sees them so radiant, so engrossed. "And, indeed, they deserve it. Fancy, thirteen years' constancy, and in our age, too! It seems like a veritable romance!"

One evening they go to the theatre; the piece is Robertson's comedy, "Caste," and as Lauraine takes her seat and glances round the well-filled house she sees in the box opposite the well-known figures of Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe, and her niece, and Keith Athelstone. Of course, they see her directly, and exchange bows, Keith keeps at the back of the box, and behind the radiant little figure of his *fiancée*.

Lady Etwynde is deeply annoyed at the *contretemps*. As for Lauraine, all the pleasure of the evening is spoilt for her.

After the second act she sees Keith leave the box. A few moments afterwards he appears in their own.

"I am the bearer of a message from Mrs. Woollffe," he says to Lady Etwynde, after greetings have been exchanged. "She says I am to insist on your all coming to supper with her. She has secured one or two professional and literary celebrities, and it will be very

charming. She won't take no. There, I have delivered my message verbatim."

He speaks hurriedly, and a little nervously. Colonel Carlisle looks at his "ladye love," and declares he is quite ready to accept if she is. Lady Etwynde, seeing how calm and indifferent Lauraine appears, is at a loss what to say.

"We, I mean Lady Vavasour and I, were——" she stammers. Lauraine looks quickly up—

"I should be delighted to meet such charming society," she says. "I am quite ready to waive our previous engagement if you are, Etwynde."

So there remains nothing but to accept, and Keith retires to inform Mrs. Woollffe of the success of his mission.

"You are sure you do not mind?" asks Lady Etwynde kindly, as she bends forward to her friend, when they are alone.

"Not in the least—why should I?" answers Lauraine. "And I always like Mrs. Woollffe. I should be sorry to offend her, and we have no excuse to offer."

"And you never tell 'white lies,'" smiles Lady Etwynde. "Isn't she wonderful, Cyril?"

"Lady Vavasour is indeed an example to most of her sex," answers the Colonel. "I thought they were all addicted to that harmless little practice. But I am glad you have decided upon going to Mrs. Woollffe's. I am delighted with her niece, although I have a remembrance of being 'questioned' within an inch of my life five minutes after my first introduction to them."

"Do you remember that evening?" asks Lady Etwynde softly.

"Do I not?" his eyes answer for him, as under cover of the dim light he touches her hand.

She looks up and meets his glance, and smiles softly back with perfect understanding.

Ah, no shadow of doubt or wrong will ever come between herself and him again. Lauraine notes that fond

glance, that swift comprehension, and her heart grows sick and cold as she thinks of the emptiness of her own life. A woman never feels the want of love so much as when she sees another in possession of what she has lost.

If beauty, wit, and intelligence can make a supper party brilliant, Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe should have had no reason to complain. None of the "celebrities" disappoint. "Dresden China" is a host in herself, Colonel Carlisle is delightful, Lady Etwynde radiant. The only silent members of the party are Keith Athelstone and Lauraine.

A strange constraint is upon them both. As from time to time their eyes meet, each notes with a heavy heart the change wrought in these few months. On Keith it is even more apparent. His face is as pale as if the hot young blood had been frozen in its currents, and no longer could warm and colour that passionless exterior. The half petulant, wayward manner which had been charming in its very youthfulness and caprice, was now grave and chill, and had lost all its brightness and vivacity.

"He is not happy," thinks Lauraine sadly, and she glances at the pretty little sparkling creature opposite, who is chattering and laughing as if she had not a care in the world, and had certainly escaped the contamination of her lover's gravity.

"Do you make a long stay in London?" asks Keith, in a low voice, when the clatter of tongues and laughter is at its height.

Lauraine looks suddenly up, and meets the blue eyes that seem to have lost all their fire and eagerness now. "No; only two or three weeks. Lady Etwynde comes back with me to Falcon's Chase for Christmas."

"I—I have something to ask you," he says, almost humbly. "I have longed to see you often—just for one half-hour—to say this. You know I have grown so accustomed to take counsel with you that the old habit clings to me still. May I call on you to-morrow? May

I see you alone? Do not look so alarmed; you need not fancy I have forgotten—Erlsbach."

"I shall be very glad to see you if you want my advice," says Lauraine, very coldly. "But I can scarcely imagine you do. Surely, in all the momentous arrangements before you, Miss Jefferson is the person you should consult."

"Yes," he answers quietly, "and her taste and mine so invariably clash that I find the best thing to do is to yield her undisputed choice. Can you imagine me yielding the palm of all things? Beaten into subjection. A good beginning, is it not?"

Lauraine looks at him, inexpressibly pained by his words and tone. "She is very charming, and I daresay will make an admirable wife," she says uneasily. "I am sure every one admires your choice!"

"Isn't that rather a disadvantage nowadays?" says Keith bitterly. "'The husband of the pretty Mrs. So-and-so' is not a very dignified appellation. You see scores of men running after your wife, and if you object are called a jealous fool, or 'bad style' or something of that sort. We certainly live in a delightful age for—women."

"I don't think you ought to affect that cynical style of talking," says Lauraine gravely. "It doesn't sit naturally on your years, and it is too much like the caught-up cant of society. Women are no worse now than they have always been, I suppose, nor men either."

"It is like old times to have you 'lecturing' me," says Keith, with a sudden smile—the first she has seen on his lips to-night.

Lauraine colours and remembers. "Well, you deserve a lecture for speaking so. I hate to hear men, especially *young* men, abusing women! As if the worst of us were not, after all, better than most of you. And what do you know, *really* know, of women? At your age a man is hardly conscious of what he wants except amusement and excitement; and the woman who gives him these,

be her moral nature ever so vile, is the woman from whom he takes his opinions of the whole sex. '*Toujours femme varie*' has a wide meaning. To deduce from *one* an opinion of all, is the greatest folly a man can commit."

"What a tirade!" says Keith amusedly. "I know well enough your sex are enigmas. It is hard to make out what you really are. And I am quite sure that I shall never meet another woman like you; but I hope you don't mean to say that I have formed my opinion from a 'bad' specimen."

"I was speaking of men in general," says Lauraine, somewhat hurriedly. "The fashion of talking slightingly of women is a most pernicious one. Certainly we are to blame, or our age, for such a fashion. Women have too little dignity nowadays; but they suffer for it, by losing their own prestige in the sight of men."

"You would never lose your self-respect," says Keith, in a low voice.

"I should be the most miserable woman alive if I did," she answers composedly; but her cheeks burn, and in her heart she says: "I have lost it—long ago!"

"Ah," says Keith bitterly, "it is well to be you. Heaven help you if you had been cast in a weaker mould, like those you condemn; if you had to look back on life as only a *coup manque*."

A burst of riotous laughter drowns his words. The whole table is convulsed over some *risqué* American story told with inimitable point and humour by the lovely rosy lips of "Dresden China."

As they part that night Keith whispers in Lauraine's ear: "To-morrow, twelve, I will call."

CHAPTER XXIV

LAURAINE wakes up next morning with a vague consciousness that she has done something wrong, something which she regrets. Why should she have granted this

interview to Keith Athelstone? Why should he have asked for it?

And yet, amidst all her disquietude, she smiles bitterly as she thinks how far away, how "over and done with," is that old time between them. She is married, he about to be married. There can be nothing to fear now.

During breakfast she is silent and preoccupied. She wonders what excuse she can make to Lady Etwynde for breaking a shopping engagement; but, as if fate played into her hands, Lady Etwynde tells her that Colonel Carlisle is coming to drive her to Bond Street that morning to choose some diamonds he has seen, and so the dressmakers must be put off. Lauraine seizes the chance delightedly, and says she will stay at home and have a quiet morning for once, and at half-past eleven Lady Etwynde drives off in her *fiancé's* mail phaeton, and Lauraine finds herself alone.

Her uneasiness increases. She can settle to nothing. A feverish colour burns in her cheeks, her eyes are brilliant. Every step in the street, every ring at the bell, startles and unnerves her. Again and again she wishes she had not promised to see Keith. Again and again does she find herself hoping, praying he may not come after all.

Twelve strikes. She is sitting in the "cameo" room —her own special favourite—her eyes watch the hands of the clock with an absorbed fascination.

One minute past, two, three, four, five. He will not come. Ten minutes past. Now she is quite sure he will not. Is she relieved, or sorry? Eleven minutes past.

He is here. "I am sorry to be late. I was detained," he says, greeting her nervously. "I should have liked to keep up my old character for punctuality."

She gives him her hand. Now that he *has* come she feels calm and composed once more, and all her gentle dignity of manner returns. "And what is the momentous business on which I am to give my opinion?" she asks, as he takes the low seat opposite her own and looks steadily at her.

For an instant he is silent. Then he shakes back the soft hair from his brow with the impatient gesture that she well remembers.

"It is only—this," he says. "If I go through with this marriage it will drive me mad!"

Startled, surprised out of all her self-control, Lauraine looks at him in dread and horror.

"Why do you come to me and tell me this?" she says piteously. "Of what use is it?"

"None, I suppose. I only wanted to say I took your advice; that with might and main I set myself to work to care for Nan. I might as well have saved myself the trouble. There are times when a devil within me rises and tempts me to kill her: when I hate myself for deceiving her, and her for being deceived; when—— But why pain your ears with such folly? This thing is too hard for me. I cannot do it, Lorry—I *cannot*."

"Oh, Keith!" It is such a sorrowful little cry. It is just as when in their childish days some deed or freak of his had grieved his little playmate's gentle heart. It thrills through him with a pain that is intolerable.

"For God's sake, don't speak like that—don't pity me!" he cries wildly. "It is more than I can bear. Oh, Lorry, don't think I have come here to-day to distress you with the old sorrow. It is not that, indeed. I only wanted to say that I have brought double dishonour on my head by trying to do what you seemed to think would cure me; to ask you if you would have me go through with this horrible farce—for, as there is a Heaven above us, I would sooner die the worst death you could name, than speak such a lie in face of God and man as I should speak did I promise to be a husband to —Nan." His voice is low and husky, and the words come out with fierce, unstudied eloquence.

Lauraine's heart aches as she listens, as she looks. She is utterly at a loss what to say.

"I parted from you in anger. I spoke roughly, cruelly. I said I would never come to you again," he

goes on, looking at her white face—his own as white and sorrowful. "I have longed often to ask your pardon. I do it now. There is but one course open to me. I must leave this country. I must leave any place that has a memory of—you. I think sometimes I shall go mad if I don't. I think you would be shocked, Lorry, if you could look into my soul and see the utter blankness there. I am not old, and there is no ice in my veins yet, and forgetfulness won't come for trying any more than—love. Oh, if it only would—if it only would!"

For an instant a sob rises in his throat and chokes his utterance. He rises, ashamed of his weakness, and paces the room with hurried, uneven steps.

"I am forgetting myself. I did not mean to say such things," he says presently. "When I am with you I can think of nothing else. Oh, my darling! how *could* you have given yourself away from me? Will ever any man love you as I have done, and do!"

Lauraine's heart is rent asunder by the fierce, unstudied pathos of his words. She sees that her own weakness has wrecked two lives effectually, and now her whole soul is filled with anguish and with dread.

"I can see at last that the only course for me to pursue is complete avoidance of your presence," he goes on, coming over to the mantelpiece as he speaks and leaning his arm upon it so as to keep his face out of her sight. "We should be all, or nothing, to each other; and I being mad and reckless, and you good and pure, it is easy to see which of the two is our fate."

"Good and pure!" cries Lauraine, with sudden passionate shame; "had I been *that* I should never have paltered with temptation one single moment. I should have been deaf to your entreaties and persuasions that summer night. I should have sent you from me then, not weakly yielded to a course of action that has made me as wretched as yourself."

"You could never be *that*," he says, looking down at her anguished face. "You are too cold, too proud.

But so much the better. I would not wish the worst foe I had to endure what I have endured for you, and shall endure, I suppose, till I die. That sounds rather like mock heroics," he adds, with a little bitter laugh; "but I think you know me better than to suppose it's 'put on.' I made up my mind when I saw you that I would tell you this farce could not go on. I shall tell Nan the same. She's a good little thing, and is worth a better fate than she would have as my wife. God! The mockery of that word! At night sometimes it is as if a chorus of fiends were jabbering it in my ears, and driving me mad with the horrible sound."

"What will you say—how explain?" falters Lauraine.

"Oh, you need not be afraid that your name will suffer," he says, with bitterness. "I shall take care of that. Let her think me the mean, contemptible cur I am."

The hot cruel colour flies into Lauraine's cheeks.

"You are ungenerous to say that!" she exclaims. "I am not afraid of what any one says. I know I am to blame. But because I have erred once it is no reason that I should do so again. Right and wrong are set plainly enough before us. I have tried, feebly enough, to keep to the straight path; I cannot forget duty, honour, so easily. If I could—if I had—oh, Keith, ask yourself, would your love be what it is now?"

"No; it would not," he says slowly. "Though I am so bitter against you I would not have you shamed by my selfishness. I—I think—so much at least you have taught me. But you—understand, do you not? I cannot do impossibilities, and—now at last, I come to you to say 'Good-bye.'"

A sudden mist of tears dims her eyes. It seems as if all around grows cold and grey, and a barrier of ice stands between her and any hope of happiness.

There is a long silence. He still leans there, his head on his hand, his face turned towards her as if to gaze his last on the beauty he loves and remembers with so absorbed and passionate a fidelity. Her eyes, amidst

those blinding tears, meet his own longing gaze. She rises from her seat and holds out her hand, while her voice, broken and full of unutterable sadness, cries out: "Oh, Keith, what should I say—what should I do? May God have mercy on us both."

"If you wish His mercy on *you*, don't cry," says Keith hoarsely, "or you will make me so desperate that I shall forfeit any little bit of kindness you may still feel! Be cold, cruel, scornful if you please, but don't drive me mad with sight of your sorrow. Mine I can bear—it is no new friend. But yours——" Lauraine dashes the tears from her eyes, and makes a violent effort at self-control. "I cannot ask you to forgive me," she says; "it would be better if you could learn to hate me. I wonder you do not, when you think of all the sorrow I have brought into your life."

"I have tried my best to hate you," he says gloomily; "I *cannot*. Do you suppose that if, by any deed, any power of will, I could tear your memory from my heart, and once again know peace, that I would not do it? God knows how gladly! But I cannot; I must go on thinking of you, loving you——"

He ceases abruptly, then goes on:

"And once you put your arms round my neck and told me you would be mine 'for ever.' There are times now when I seem to feel that soft touch and the thrill of your unasked kiss, and—and then, Lorry, I remember that 'for ever' meant less than—four years."

"You—you promised," falters Lauraine.

"Yes, you are right. So I did. I seem to do nothing but make promises and break them with you. Well, there is one comfort, after to-day I shall have no chance of doing either one or other. There can be no distance too wide to set between our lives. And—oh God, to think of what might have been!"

"Life is full of mistakes," says Lauraine, weeping unrestrainedly now. "Oh, had I but known—had I but known! Yet, Keith, something tells me that

time will bring you consolation—time and the consciousness that you have done right."

"Your words are beyond my powers of acceptance," he answers gloomily. "If I am doing right now, it is from no good motive, I assure you. If again you said to me 'Stay,' there would be no more parting this side the grave, Lorry, for you and me."

His voice is very low and unsteady, but she hears every word, and all the wild love and longing, the weariness and emptiness of her life, seem beating like waves against the poor weak barriers of honour.

"I think I would give all the world to be able to say it to-day," she cries, with sudden passion. "But, oh, Keith! the 'to-morrow,' that would follow; the sin and misery that would be with us both for ever! Is life or love worth one's eternal ruin? Is our parting now to be compared to that 'other' parting that would have to follow—the eternal parting that would be so hopeless because of the guilt that lay upon our souls?"

"I do not think a great love can ever be a sin," Keith answers passionately. "And mine would last you if ever human love did last. So much I know of myself, bad as I am."

"You are not bad," says Lauraine gently. "And I am sure you won't threaten me with the worse misery of your recklessness as once before you did. The nobler and better your life, the less will be my suffering. And you won't be cruel enough to add to that, will you?"

The pleading voice, the tearful eyes, unman him. "Why don't you abuse me, condemn me, call me the selfish brute I am?" he says, with that rapid contrition that so often marks his wildest moods. "No, Lorry, I won't be 'bad' if I can help it. I wouldn't wish to add to your suffering, though I am so selfish. Let me go now, while I have strength, while the good fit is on me. It mayn't last, you know, and then——"

He is standing facing her, and white as death she looks up and meets the mournful gaze of the "bad blue

eyes." There is no badness in them now, only a great anguish and a great despair. One long, long look they give—a look that seems to read her heart, and all its love that she denies, and all its suffering that he has given. He takes her hands and draws her near, nearer. She trembles like a leaf. Her eyelids droop, her lips quiver.

"May I—kiss you?" he whispers.

She makes no answer in words, for speech is beyond her. She forgets everything now, save that she loves, and that this is an eternal farewell to her lover.

There comes such a moment of forgetfulness to all women who love, otherwise, indeed, there would be none to fall for love's sake only. Otherwise, how easy would be the conflict that, of all others is the wildest, the fiercest, and hardest to wage.

She lifts her head. The anguish, the entreaty in her eyes frighten, and yet gladden him. For in this moment he feels he is master of her fate, and she is unconscious of the fact. Did he but hold her in his arms—did the tide of passion, locked back within his throbbing heart, find vent in one word, one caress, he knows he could not answer for himself—for her!

It is the critical moment of Keith Athelstone's life. All that is best and worst in his heart are at war; all that is most hard to resist wraps him in a flame of tempting that burns away all good resolves, and almost stifles the faint whispers of a conscience that pleads for her.

For her—for her. To save her from *herself* as well as from his own mad love. To leave her unharmed, untainted by the baseness of his selfish passion; to be worthy of love, as love had been in those sweet, glad, childish days. These thoughts flash like lightning through his brain, even as he meets her mournful eyes, and reads their unconscious betrayal.

"Oh, love, good-bye! Let me go!" he cries wildly, and throws her hands aside with almost cruel force.

He is blind and dizzy with pain. A word, a look from her, and he knows that his strength will be broken like

a reed—that he will never leave her again ; and in his blindness and dizziness and agony of heart he rushes away, flings the door wide open, and finds himself face to face with—Sir Francis Vavasour !

CHAPTER XXV

FATE delights in playing mankind spiteful tricks.

The present instance is no exception. Lauraine has sunk back into her chair, faint and spent with emotion ; scarcely conscious, indeed, of what is going on around her ; and in this state her husband's rough voice breaks upon her ear.

" What the devil's the matter ? I met Athelstone flying out like a bomb-shell, and you look like a ghost. Have you been having a—fraternal quarrel ? "

She starts to her feet and looks at him with wild, wide eyes. " Francis, you——" she gasps.

" You don't seem very pleased to see me," says her husband, looking at her suspiciously. " What on earth have you been doing with yourself ? You look as ill as possible." He takes her hand and kisses her carelessly on the cheek as he speaks.

" I have not been well," she falters, trying for composure, " and Etwynde asked me to come to her for a few weeks, and I thought the change would do me good. How is it you are in London ? Did you know I was here ? "

" Yes. I got your letter at the club and came on. I only arrived last night."

He throws himself into a chair, and looks at her curiously. " What was the row with Athelstone ?—you haven't told me." Lauraine grows very white.

" He is going abroad—away for years. His engagement is all over. He came to say good-bye."

Sir Francis gives a long whistle.

" *Nom de Dieu* ? Is that so ? And have you had a hand in breaking it off, my lady ? "

" What do you mean ? " she asks, looking at him with grave surprise.

"Mean? Oh, you and Keith were such chums always. I thought he had done it because you—objected. I know you never liked the marriage."

"It had nothing to do with me," says Lauraine coldly. "And the girl was very fond of him. I am sorry for her."

"It strikes me that Jean wasn't so far out, after all," says Sir Francis, with a harsh laugh. "You and Keith *do* seem to have a remarkably good understanding with each other."

Lauraine looks at him, her eyes dark with anger.

"Since when have you taken to speak so familiarly of Lady Jean Salomans?" she asks; "and by what right does she discuss my actions with you?"

"Come, that won't do," says her husband, throwing himself back in his chair, and looking at her defiantly. "It's rather too like the proverb of the pot and the kettle. You discuss me with Keith Athelstone, I have no doubt, and—other things too."

"Do you mean to insult me?" asks Lauraine, rising from her seat, and looking steadily at him.

He shrugs his shoulders.

"You are always so tragic. Insult you? No. Only before you question my actions, it might be as well to look at your own. Are they quite—blameless?"

She stands there, and all the colour fades from her face; her limbs tremble. "I will not affect to misunderstand you," she says slowly. "But——"

He interrupted her roughly. "Don't trouble to explain. Of course we all know you are *sans reproche.* Only don't turn the cold shoulder to other women, when you yourself are no better than they—seem. Were I a jealous husband I should have forbidden Keith Athelstone your presence long ere this."

"There would have been no need," she says proudly. "I am not a woman to forget honour and self-respect."

"Oh, fine words are easy," scoffs her husband. "To the untempted virtue is no merit. And although any

one could see Keith Athelstone was making himself a fool about you, yet you never cared a straw for him. If you had——"

"Well?" she asks, very low, as he pauses.

He laughs again. "You would have been no better than—others, I suppose. What you call self-respect is only another word for cold-heartedness."

Lauraine thinks of the scene through which she has just passed. Cold-hearted? Well, if she be, she thanks God for the fact. That her husband should speak thus to her fills her with an intense shame. After all, would he have cared so very much, if—— The evil thought coils round her like a serpent, she feels sick and stifled, and full of pain and fear.

"I am going to my room," she says hurriedly. "Will you excuse me? I—I am not very well."

"*Ma chére*," laughs her husband roughly, "one doesn't stand on ceremony after a few years of married life. Don't stay here for me. I'm off too, now. I have heaps of things to do."

"Will you dine with us to-night?" asks Lauraine.

"To-night? Well, yes. I suppose it will look better, and I should like to see what sort of fellow your æsthetic friend has captured. Jove! if men only knew what fools they are to marry!"

But Lauraine has left. Sir Francis takes up his hat. His face is dark and disturbed.

"Jean was right. There *is* something," he mutters. "But Lauraine is not like—her. Should I be better pleased if she were? Sometimes I think I would give the world for freedom; and yet——"

The door opens. Lady Etwynde sweeps in, as radiant and fair a vision as eyes could wish to behold.

"Sir Francis! You here, and alone! Why, where is Lauraine?"

"Gone to her room. Not well, or tired, or something," he says, as he shakes hands. "I am glad you have had her here; she mopes herself to death down

at the Chase. I can't see what she is so fond of it for. I detest it myself."

"There are associations, you see," says Lady Etwynde. "Her child was born there, and there died."

He feels somewhat ashamed. He thinks of his wife—how young, how sorrowful she looked; how all the life and radiance seemed crushed out of her heart. But then the old weariness and impatience assert themselves. Life with Lauraine has been so flat and montonous.

"Well, at all events it does not agree with her," he says, brusquely. "I was glad to find her in town. I got her letter at the club."

"Will you dine with us to-night?" asks Lady Etwynde. "We are quite alone, so it won't be very lively, and you have had so much brilliant society lately."

He looks quickly at her. He is always suspicious of women's words; always given to looking under them for some hidden meaning. But Lady Etwynde's face is innocence itself.

"Thanks. Yes. I told Lauraine I would come," he says, not very cordially, for indeed an evening with these two women looks a dreary penance to him.

"And you will stay here, will you not?" says Lady Etwynde. "You won't go back to an hotel while Lauraine is in town?"

"Oh, I could not think of inflicting myself upon you," he says hurriedly: "and it is such a flying visit—thanks all the same. And now, good-bye till to-night."

"Good-bye," says Lady Etwynde coldly. She thinks his behaviour both strange and callous, and very uncomplimentary to his wife. Then he leaves, and she goes to Lauraine, and finds her lying in a darkened room, white, and spent and exhausted.

"My dear, what is it?" she asks, in alarm. "Has anything happened? Are you ill?" For a moment Lauraine hesitates. Then the sight of the sweet, compassionate face melts the hardness that she fain would keep about her heart, and in a few broken words she re-

lates the whole sad tale of that interview and farewell.

"My only comfort is that at last he will go—surely he will leave me," she says, in conclusion. "Indeed, it is time. The strain is more than I can bear. Besides, Sir Francis has noticed it—he said so; and his words were scarce a greater insult than I deserved, for if I have not sinned as the world counts sin, yet I have not been guiltless—far from it."

Lady Etwynde looks at her wistfully. In her own great happiness she can feel tenfold the sorrowful fate of these sundered lives. "And he is going to break off his marriage?" she says anxiously.

"Yes," says Lauraine. "He says to go through with it is beyond his power."

"Poor fellow!" exclaims Lady Etwynde, with involuntary compassion.

She is angry with him, and yet sorry for him, for he has proved so faithful; and, after all, is any love quite unselfish if it be worth the name?

"My poor Lauraine!" she murmurs involuntarily. "Your marriage has indeed been a fatal error; but, as I have said before, there remains nothing but to make the best of it. The only thing for you and Keith is separation. All other feelings except that one forbidden one are a poor pretence. I feared that long ago. I am glad you have been so brave, and he too. Believe me, hard as duty is, the very effort of doing it creates strength for further trials. The consciousness of right is a satisfaction in itself, even when one is misjudged."

Lauraine listens, and the tears stand on her lashes, and roll slowly down her cheeks.

"My life is very hard," she says bitterly.

"Would it be less hard if you had ceased to respect yourself, if you had lost the creeds and faiths which still make honour your one anchor of safety? I think not."

"I can think of nothing now save him and his unhappiness," cries Lauraine wildly. "I have never loved him as I love him to-day. Oh! I know it is wrong, shame-

ful to say such a thing; but it is the truth, and I must speak it—this once. Why, do you know that when he said good-bye to me I could have flung myself at his feet and said, 'Let the world go by, let sin or misery be my portion for evermore—only do not *you* leave me!' It seemed as if nothing in life was worth anything beside one hour of love! And yet—well, how good an actress I must be, Etwynde—he called me cold-hearted."

"Thank God he did!" exclaims Lady Etwynde. "Oh, Lauraine, your good angel must have saved you to-day. I did not think it had come to this; and I cannot find it in my heart to blame you, for—I love too."

"And my husband taunted me with being no better than other women, simply because I had never been tempted," continues Lauraine presently. "Well, perhaps in heart I am not. He may have been right, and virtue is, after all, only a matter of—temperament."

"Oh, hush! I cannot bear to hear you talk like that," cries Lady Etwynde. "Does he—does Sir Francis suspect anything?"

"He said he knew Keith loved me," answers Lauraine wearily. "Fancy hearing one's husband speak of the love of another man! I felt treacherous—shamed in his sight and my own. He could not understand—he would not believe in the long, long struggle, the pain, the suffering of it all. I feel as if conscience and honour had both suffered in the conflict, as if with my child I had lost all that was pure and of any worth in me. And now the world may say what it likes. I don't care even to contradict it."

"That is not true," exclaims Lady Etwynde. "You have struggled nobly, you have done your best, and the fruits of the victory will be yours in time. At least you hold the hope of meeting your little child, innocent and unshamed, despite fierce tempting and all the weariness and sorrow of your life."

Lauraine's tears fall faster and more fast.

"My child! Oh, why was he not left to me? The

touch of his innocent kiss, the sound of his voice, the clasp of his arms were strong as all the chains of duty cannot be. And now there is no one—no one. And I am so lonely, so desolate, and life looks so long, and death so far away!"

The tears rush to Lady Etwynde's eyes. "Oh, my darling! What can I say to comfort you? Do you know, Lauraine once—in years that are gone—when I felt reckless and despairing as yourself, I left the house, and went out full of some wild resolve too terrible to mention. It was a Sunday evening, I remember well. The bells were sounding everywhere, and I walked on through the quiet streets with madness in my heart. Suddenly, as I passed the open door of a church, I heard a voice singing. Involuntarily I stopped, listened, entered. It was a large church, and full of people. Some one gave me a chair, and I sank down wearily enough. Then, pealing above the chords of the organ, floating up to the great vaulted roof, I heard again the beautiful voice, and it sang these words: 'O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire.' You know them, do you not, and the music that weds them so exquisitely from the 'Elijah'? I knelt there with my head bowed on my hands, and the tears falling down my cheeks. I remembered nothing; neither place nor presence. It only seemed as if an angel's voice was breathing comfort to my passion-wrecked soul, as if that beautiful promise fell over my spirit and brought peace, and healing, and rest. 'Thy heart's desire!' Oh, Lauraine, think of that! Twelve long years ago that message came to me, and I was comforted! Twelve years, and now God *has* fulfilled His promise. My heart's desire is mine."

Lauraine has listened, stilled and awed.

"Thy heart's desire." The words sink into her very soul, and wake a thousand varied emotions.

"But my 'heart's desire' is all wrong—all sin—whichever way I look at it," she says, half despairingly.

"God can make it right," whispers Lady Etwynde drawing the white, sad face down upon her bosom, and softly kissing the weary lips. "If you can take those words home to your heart as I did, my darling, your burden will grow easier to bear; the strength you ask for will be given. Oh, life is hard, terribly hard, I know! There is so much sorrow, so little joy; and then the errors, the sins which beset, the weakness that shackles us!—but still, still, we are not tried *beyond* our strength, and we may be able at last to look back and see it was all for the best!"

"What would I not give to recall these last four years!" cries Lauraine bitterly. "How different my life might have been!"

"There's no turning back," says Lady Etywnde solemnly. "Errors, once committed, are irrevocable; for them we must suffer; by them we must abide. Ah, my dear! who would not live their time again if they might, and by the light of the present alter all the mistakes of the past? But it cannot be done. All the remorse and all the regret are so futile. Tears of blood cannot wash away one memory, take out the sting of one mistake. We must just bear life as it is, till Death seals all its woes into forgetfulness."

"You are so good," cries Lauraine sadly. "I am not like you. I am wicked and rebellious, and I cannot accept my fate with patience, even though I know my own past weakness is to blame for all my present misery."

"I am not good. Do not praise me," says Lady Etwynde humbly. "And I know I do not deserve my present happiness. It makes me fearful of my great joy. For I was so wicked and rebellious once, and I wonder often that God did not take my life instead of sparing it, and blessing it as He has done. Now, darling, you look worn out, and must need rest. I will leave you for awhile. If your husband suspects anything you must try and banish such suspicions, or your married life will grow yet more unhappy. The great wrench is

over, the worst is past. Time, and the consciousness of having done what is right, will give you peace and comfort at last. Youth and strength are yours still, and many good gifts of life, and if you throw yourself into others' sufferings, and widen your sympathy with the interests and trials of those around you, believe me it will do much to making your own troubles less. I speak from an experience as bitter as, if less hopeless, than your own." And once more kissing the closed lips which seem too weary for tears, she lays Lauraine back on the pillows, and softly leaves the room.

"'Thy heart's desire!'" Lauraine cries to herself. "Oh, God—not that—not that should be my prayer. Teach my heart to say, '*Thy* will, not mine!'"

CHAPTER XXVI

When Keith Athelstone leaves Lauraine that morning he is scarcely conscious of what he is doing.

And yet with his brain whirling, with a desperate sense of his life's complete failure oppressing his heart, he goes straight to his *fiancée's* house and asks to see her.

Miss Nan flies into the room, as she expresses it, "like greased lightning."

"Well, what's the matter?" she cries. "Has the bank broke, or has Worth failed, or—— Why, Keith" (with sudden gravity), "are you ill?"

Her voice seems to recall his senses. He sits down and looks sadly at the radiant little figure.

"Nan," he says brokenly, "I—I have come to say that I have behaved to you like a cad, a brute. I have no excuse to offer. I can only tell you the plain truth, and that is——"

"Stop!" she cries suddenly; and all her airs and affectations seem to fall off her, leaving only a quiet, pale-faced little maiden, whose big, bright eyes are clouded and sad. "I know what you mean. You don't love me. It is not what comes to me, Keith, only

I thought I might help to console you, being so fond of you as I was, for—she—can be nothing to you after all."

"You—you know——" stammers Keith.

"Know, of course I know," she answers, with pretty contempt. "Do you think I was reared in Boston and can't see a little bit through a stone wall, specially when that stone wall has some mighty big chinks to let the daylight in? Know—why, who doesn't know that's ever seen you and 'my Lady Lauraine' together?"

The colour mounts to Keith's brow. "And I have done her all this harm," he thinks. "Don't be afraid to speak out to me," continues Nan. "I'm too fond of you to be cross, and I know you've tried your best to be true to me. We'd best forget that we ever thought of being more than friends. Don't you trouble to explain. If you hadn't said this, I should have done so before it came to the real business. I don't want to marry a man whose heart is set on another woman, and you loved her before you knew me—didn't you?"

"Yes," he says quickly. "Since we were boy and girl together."

"And why did she jilt you?" asked Dresden China tranquilly. Her heart is so full, and pained, and angry, that she is afraid of betraying herself.

"She was forced into marrying another man during my absence," says Keith coldly. "I was forbidden to write, and when I trusted—well, it was her mother—to tell her about myself—my changed fortunes—she never did. When I came back from New York she was married."

"If she'd have been worth her salt she'd have kept true to you," says Nan. "I don't believe in girls caving in, and marrying to please other people. I wouldn't, not for fifty mothers, leave alone one."

"No, you are a staunch little thing," says Keith, looking up at the bright *mignonne* face; "and you are worth a man's whole heart and life, Nan, and I feel I am neither worth the offering nor the acceptance. I have been a

fool; but at last I seem to see my folly, and I am going to make one vigorous effort to conquer it. I am going to leave England—perhaps for ever."

"I think it is the very best thing you can do," she says quietly. "What is the use of wasting your life, and eating your heart out for a woman who can be nothing to you?"

"And you will forgive me my treachery to yourself?"

"My dear Keith," she says, with a little quivering smile. "I knew you were making a cat's-paw of me, but somehow I didn't mind *that* so much, if it would have been any real good to you. In time, I thought perhaps you might have got fond of me. Lots of men are, you know; but I began to see that it wouldn't do—that you couldn't take to me, and no wonder, when I was so different to—her. But as for forgiving, that's no big thing to do. And I never bear malice; 'tisn't in me. Yes, you go right straight away out of the country, and I'll make all this look natural enough, don't you fear. You're not the first young man I've knocked off by many. I'm a born flirt, they say. Well, I'm only acting up to my character."

Behind the bright eyes is a weight of tears she longs to shed, and will not. The brave little heart is throbbing and aching with pain. But Keith sees nothing, suspects nothing. He is only relieved she takes it so well, that after all she does not seem to care so very much.

He rises and holds out his hands. "You are far too good to me, Nan," he says brokenly. "I feel ashamed when I think of my conduct. God bless you, child, and make you happy."

"Too good to you," echoes Nan softly. "I don't know. It strikes me, Keith, that you are just the sort of fellow women would be 'good to.' I surmise they can't help it. It's just your way with them, you know. So it's really 'Good-bye.' Take my advice and go to the Rockies and shoot grizzlies. That'll cure you if anything will."

Not by any means a romantic parting, or a touching one; but it is a very faithful heart that masks its pain so bravely, and a very loving one too.

A week later, and town is eagerly discussing two startling pieces of news. One is that Keith Athelstone, the rich young American, has sailed for Timbuctoo or Tahiti, or New Zealand, people are not quite sure which; the other that Joel Salomans, the great millionaire, has come to smash over some gigantic speculation, and has blown his brains out in his hotel in Paris.

In the deepest of mourning, with her handsome brows drawn into an angry frown, with a pile of letters and papers on the table before her, sits Lady Jean. "It is ruin, simply ruin!" she mutters fiercely, as she pushes the pile impatiently aside and looks at the long column of figures before her.

Ruin to her means some five hundred a year, secured to herself, and a country house bought and settled on her by Mr. Salomans a year before. She is at present in Paris. It is a week since her husband's death, and the scandal and *esclandre* are flying everywhere, and adorning special articles in all the society journals.

Lady Jean feels very bitter against the dead man, and very bitter against everything in general. She has had but few condolences, and those have been spiced with feminine malice. She is quite alone in her hotel in the Rue Scribe, and her lawyer has worried her into a headache this morning with explanations and formalities.

While she is in this unamiable mood the door opens, and Sir Francis Vavasour enters. Lady Jean blushes scarlet as she rises to greet him. To do her justice the emotion is genuine enough. She has thought herself forsaken—forgotten. "You—how good of you!" she says, and holds out both her hands. He takes them and draws her towards him, and kisses her many times. She does not rebuke him; the days for pretence have long been over between them.

"And so you are—free?" he says.

"And penniless and—disgraced, you should add," she answers, sinking down on the couch by his side. "This horrible scandal will kill me, I think." This is all her regret for the dead man she has deceived, goaded, embarrassed by her extravagances, and wantonly neglected and ridiculed through all her married life.

"Oh, no, it won't," says Sir Francis consolingly. "Scandal never killed any one yet, especially a woman. But are things very bad?"

Lady Jean explains as well as she can the lawyer's wearisome phrases, and her own definition of ruin.

"And what will you do?" asks Sir Francis.

"I have scarcely thought about it yet. I can't live at Norristown, it would be absurd. I must let it. Oh, Frank isn't it hard? Fancy a life like this for—me!"

"It is a trial, certainly," he says, pulling his thick moustache with an abstracted air. "I don't know what the deuce you're to do, unless you let me help you."

She laughs contemptuously. "No, thank you. We'll stop short of money favours. I haven't come to that yet."

"But what can you do?" persisted Sir Francis. "Five hundred pounds a year! Why, it wouldn't keep you in gowns for three months—and do you expect to eat, drink, pay rent, and clothe yourself, on such a beggar's pittance?"

"Oh, I shall get into debt for a year, of course," says Lady Jean coolly, "and then—marry—I suppose."

He turns very white. "You say that to—me?"

"My dear Frank, why not? You are a man of the world; you don't suppose I am going to stagnate in poverty and obscurity till some happy chance gives you the freedom I possess. Not I—pshaw! it is absurd. I must do the best for myself. You are not surely so selfish as to expect me to throw away a good chance for—you."

"I thought you loved me," he says gloomily; "you told me so."

"Love you! Of course I love you! But what use—

now, any more than before? Do you expect fidelity in a case like ours? We have both outlived the age of romance, and now, of course, I must be doubly cautious not to draw down calumny on my head. Were you free it would be a different matter. But, of course, your wife is a saint, and Keith Athelstone an anchorite. Fraternal affection, when unfettered by fraternity, is so pure and beautiful a thing!"

He groans impatiently. "I know what you mean. But she never cared for him; and now he has broken off his projected marriage, and left England."

Lady Jean looks up in surprise.

"Left England? Are you sure?"

"Lauraine said so, and every one is talking of it."

"Lauraine told you so! Ah, how beautiful is faith! Did I not tell you that marriage would never be? What reason does he give for breaking it off?"

"Oh, the girl says she broke it off because they could not agree about furnishing their drawing-room. She is as larky and perky as ever, and treats the whole thing as a joke. Has got the young Earl of Longleat mad after her now, and I suppose will end in marrying him."

"And Keith has—left England," says Lady Jean musingly; "or is that a blind? Where is your saint?"

"Lauraine? She is staying with her æsthetic friend in Kensington. No, Jean. With all due respect to your 'cuteness, that won't do. I tell you Lauraine doesn't care two straws for the fellow, though he is madly in love with her. Why, I met him rushing out of the house like a lunatic the day he came to say 'Good-bye.' Never saw a fellow in such a state in my life, and she—she was as cool and cold as possible. Said he was going away to some foreign place or another."

"He has *not* gone!" says Lady Jean tranquilly. "I won't mind an even bet of a cool thou' on that point, Frank. While England holds Lauraine, it will hold Keith Athelstone. Of that I am quite convinced."

"I think you mistake her," says Sir Francis coldly.

"She is human, and she loves," answers Lady Jean. "Of course she is of a much higher type than ordinary women—cast in a nobler mould, and all that. But still——" She pauses meaningly. Sir Francis moves with sudden impatience. "Why talk of her?" he says. "You know I hate her."

"I know nothing of the sort," retorts Lady Jean. "You were very madly in love with her once, and you paid a high enough price for your fancy, and you *believe* in her still."

"One can respect a woman, even if one dislikes her," mutters Sir Francis.

Lady Jean's eyes flash fire beneath their lowered lids. What she has forfeited she hates to hear praised as another woman's possession.

"I am glad you find her such a paragon of virtue," she sneers. "And it must be a novel sensation for you to—respect—a woman."

"It is—rather," he answers in the same tone. "There are not many who give us the chance!"

"I think your visit has lasted long enough," says Lady Jean coldly. "As I told you before, I have to be doubly careful of *les convenances*; I am glad you did not give your name. And please do not call again until I send you word."

"You have grown mighty particular all of a sudden," exclaimed Sir Francis angrily. "Why the deuce shouldn't I call if I please? We are old friends, and surely——"

"Oh, certainly we are old friends," says Lady Jean maliciously. "But you see it behoves me to be careful. I have my future prospects to consider."

"Jean! You are not in earnest, you are only trying me?"

"*Mon cher*, I was never more in earnest in my life. I am not going to be a martyr to one man's misguided rashness, or another's selfish passion. Not I indeed. *Ce n'est pas mon métier*. No; I shall do the best for

myself, as I have said before ; and you will be magnanimous, I know, and permit the—sacrifice."

"I don't know so much about that," says Sir Francis, an evil light gleaming in his eyes. "You are too much to me for me ever to yield you up to another man. Of course before—well, that could not be helped. But now——"

"Now," says Lady Jean, with her cold smile, "you have learnt that to *respect* a woman is better than to love her. I only wish to follow your good example. I should like to be able to—respect—a man."

"Then by all means don't marry one," retorts Sir Francis. "But, joking apart, Jean, you are not serious ? You are not going to throw me off in this fashion ? "

"I said nothing about 'throwing off.' I only said it behoved me to be careful—doubly careful ; and if you come to see me now, you must come with—your wife."

"My wife ! " He stares at her stupidly.

"Certainly. As a widow I cannot receive constant visits from married men unaccompanied by their wives. It would never do. I cannot suffer you to humiliate me ; I care too much for—myself ! "

"I wish to heaven I could understand you," mutters Sir Francis. "Well, at all events, for a year, you can't carry out your threat."

She has him in such complete subjugation that he does not bluster or insist as with a weak-minded woman he would have done. Lady Jean has always ruled him with a strong hand, as a bad woman will often rule a man who yet owes her no fidelity, and has for her no respect.

"I may never carry it out," she says, with a sudden softening of her voice. "Perhaps, after all, I—love—you too well, though you don't believe it. But, as I said before, of what use—of what use ? "

His brow clears, his anger melts. "If I could only believe you ! " he says.

"Ah ! " she answers, with humility, "if I had loved *myself* better than you, I, too, might have had your

respect. But I was not wise enough to be selfish."

"For your love I would forfeit any other consideration!" he cries impetuously. "You know that well enough. Whatever you desire, I will do it; only don't forsake me."

"Whatever I desire," says Lady Jean, a slow, cruel smile flitting over her face. "Well, I will give you a task. Ask Keith Athelstone to Falcon's Chase for Christmas."

CHAPTER XXVII

LADY JEAN is right. Keith Athelstone has *not* left England. His passage was taken, all his preparations made, and then the very day before he was to sail he found himself laid prostrate by brain fever.

He was taken ill in Liverpool, and his servant, being one of that rare class who can give faithful attendance, nursed him devotedly. For weeks he lay hovering between life and death, the strength and vigour of the body fighting against the ravages of mental suffering, and the long, painful strain on brain and heart against which he had so long struggled. In his delirious frenzy his whole cry was for Lauraine. It was pitiful to see that strong young manhood bowed down to a child's weakness. As dependent as an infant on the hired services which his wealth procured, but which was so different to the tender ministry of love and friendship.

The discreet valet at times felt inclined to send to Lady Vavasour, and acquaint her with his young master's danger; but prudence withheld him. He knew she was married, and he feared to draw down his master's anger by officious interference.

At last the doctors gave hope, and Keith struggled back by slow degrees into convalescence, and saw his life given back to his own keeping once more—life dull of hue and sad enough, with all its gladness and colour painted out by the ruthless hand of disappointment—

life for which he was in no way glad or grateful to the mercy that had spared it; but still, life that he had to accept and take up, with all its tangled threads and broken hopes.

In the long, dreary days of convalescence he thought of Lauraine as he had never thought of her yet—for a wide gulf seemed to stretch between them now. He saw the headlong and undisciplined passion of his love for her in its true colours—saw to what lengths it would have gone, to what ruin it would have dragged her, and a sense of shame and self-reproach filled his heart.

Some such thoughts as these came to Keith now as he lay stretched on his couch during these dark winter days. He felt weak enough to have uttered any prayer just for Lauraine's presence, just to see the pity in her eyes, to hear the thrill in her voice as she would look at his changed face, and speak her gentle compassion. At times like these the slow hot tears of weakness would creep into his eyes until he was fain to turn his head away from his attendant's gaze, and make pretence of sleep in order to have freedom to indulge his grief at leisure.

"I must never see her again, never, unless I have grown dull and cold, and can greet her as a stranger," he thinks to himself. "How strange that I should love her so. I wonder will I ever be cured, or will this be the 'one passion of my life,' going down to my grave with me even as it has filled all my days and hours? Somehow, I think it will. I find it so hard to forget anything concerning her. Forget! Why there is not a look in her eyes, a word from her lips, not a dress or a flower she has worn that I can forget; not a summer day or a spring morning, not a season in the year that is not full of some memory of her. Oh, my love, my love, and to think that you can be nothing to me—nothing!

"Shall I ever be old, I wonder?—and then shall I have ceased to care? Out of all the world of women will there be only one for whom my heart will beat, my pulses thrill, my whole soul long and love? I have

tried to love other women—I have told them I love them; but I don't think for one moment I deceived myself, or them. Men say the sins and follies of youth come back to smite us as scourges in the after years; but I suppose my love has kept me pure in a way, and will do so. It was never sin to me till her own act made it so, for she seemed always mine in my thoughts and dreams, and I alone seemed to have the right to her. But now—well, she was wiser than I when she bade me leave her. This last year has only made us both more wretched. And she is not happy—my darling! Ah, when she loved me there was not that sad look in her eyes, and that brute is not even faithful. But of that she knows nothing, and, bad as I am, I wouldn't tell her so. Let her keep her faith unshaken, and live her life of duty. Why should I make it harder than it is? . . . . Every year now will take her further and further from me, and yet I know she loves me. I wonder what held me back when I bade her farewell? I could have taught her forgetfulness then, if never before; and yet—and yet, thank God, I did not. I think to see her eyes reproach me would be worse than this; I should feel inclined to kill myself and—her. Oh, God! what fools men can be for a woman's sake!"

Some one comes softly into the room; it is Andrews the careful and attentive. He brings a letter in his hand, and lays it down on the table by his young master's side. Keith turns towards him, and holds out a thin transparent hand for the missive. He tears open the envelope, and as he looks at the address a flush of colour steals over his face.

"Falcon's Chase, Brockfield,
"Northumberland.

"MY DEAR ATHELSTONE,

"We have only just heard of your illness, and are much concerned about it, more especially as you are

alone at an hotel, and must be dependent on quite alien services. As soon as ever your health permits, will you come to us here, and let us try to nurse you back to health once more? As the weather is so unusually mild, I do not think you will find the air of Northumberland too bracing. Lauraine, of course, joins with me in this invitation. In fact, we can't hear of a refusal. I will meet you in London, and come down with you as soon as ever your physicians give you permission for the journey. With my kindest regards, and sympathy from all mutual friends here,

"Believe me, very sincerely yours,

"FRANCIS S. VAVASOUR."

Keith reads the letter steadily through to the end, and his face grows white as the paper as he so reads it. But a new, stern look comes into his eyes, and his lips close tight under their thick moustache.

"What does it mean?" he thinks, as he reads the subtle tempting. "Can Lauraine *really* have had any hand in this? I don't believe it. No; I will not go. The snare is too plainly set." And before he can have time to alter his mind he asks for pen and ink, and dashes off a firm but courteous refusal on the plea of his physicians ordering him to a warm climate.

"She shall never have to reproach me again if I can help it," he says to himself, as exhausted with even this small exertion, he sinks back on his pillows. "She called me selfish once. Will she do so now?—now, when for her sake——"

There is only a very small house party at Falcon's Chase when Keith Athelstone's letter arrives, and the master of the house reads it with a clouded brow. He has insisted upon his wife's asking Lady Jean down, and, despite her recent bereavement, the Lady Jean accepts the invitation. She is very subdued, very mournful, lives a great deal in her own rooms, and altogether affords

a very unobtrusive spectacle of chastened sorrow. She is more than ever gracious to her hostess, and dignified to her host, and even Lady Etwynde's observant eyes can see nothing in any way suspicious.

On the morning that Keith's letter arrives Lady Jean is not at the breakfast-table and Sir Francis is impatient to tell her the news—so impatient in fact, that for once he forgets the prudence she has so strictly enjoined, and sends her a note by her maid asking her to come into the small study adjoining the library as soon as she can.

Lady Jean is annoyed at his imprudence, and in no way hurries herself to suit his wishes. When she at last enters the study she finds Sir Francis fuming at being kept waiting, and decidedly unamiable.

"Well, what is it?" she asks.

He hands her Keith's letter, and she reads it through. Her brows cloud; she throws it aside impatiently.

"The young fool!" she mutters.

On entering the smaller room she has drawn the door after her, but not quite closed it. The velvet curtains sweep down, and no one from the library can see them, but the sound of their voices is audible. It happens that Lauraine enters the outer room for a book, and is just taking it down from the case when the sound of her own name, uttered by Lady Jean's voice, strikes sharply on her ear.

"Does Lauraine know?"

"No," answers her husband's voice. "As you advised, I said nothing about it. Had Athelstone accepted, I would have told her that I had heard of his dangerous illness, and asked him here to set him up again."

"How excessively provoking!" continues Lady Jean. "Depend on it, Frank, this is a blind. Either Keith suspects we know of his love for your wife, or *she* has been beforehand."

"My dear Jean!" exclaims Sir Francis.

Lauraine waits to hear no more. Astonishment has kept her spellbound. Now she turns from the room with

a sickening, horrible sense of shame in her heart, with the blood dyeing her white face, with all the dignity and pride of womanhood stung and outraged by this unexpected discovery. Her husband and Lady Jean are cognizant of Keith's mad passion for herself, have actually plotted to bring him under her roof, to throw them together once again. For what purpose ?

Like a lightning flash the whole terrible truth seems to burst upon her. Suspicions, hints, all take new shape by the light of this new discovery—her husband's long friendship for Lady Jean, his indifference to herself. But that he could have stooped so low as to plan his wife's dishonour for the sake of his own freedom—— It seems to her almost incredible.

The whole pitfall opened for her feet now confronts her fully and clearly. If Keith had accepted, if he had come here—she unconscious of the invitation, and unable to oppose it once so accepted—what then ?

" Oh, my darling," she half sobs, " thank God you were brave and true to your better self ! They may suspect our love, but, as there is a Heaven above, they shall never shame it to their own baseness ! "

She kneels by her bed in an agony of weeping. Fear, shame, rage, disgust, sweep over her by turns. She sees the whole plot, and her own long blindness, and yet she knows she is powerless to resent either ! If her husband accuses her of loving Keith she cannot deny it, and to explain to a mind so coarse and base the struggle and the sufferings that love has cost her, would only bring down ridicule and win her no belief.

She feels quite helpless. Her enemy knows her secret, and her evil mind will colour it and send it flying abroad, and she is powerless to resent, or to deny.

A loathing, a horror of herself—of them—comes upon her. It seems to her scarcely possible that they could have sunk so low, could have plotted anything so evil. And then bitter thoughts come into her mind. Of what use to try and do right, to struggle, and sacrifice as she

has done? Duty has brought to her only added shame, only a crueller trial!

There is but one grain of comfort to her now in all her sorrow. It is that Keith has been brave and true to his word, that for *her* sake he has forfeited self for once.

"Had he listened, had he come, he would have been a coward," she says to herself, and then the thought of his danger, his weakness, comes over her, and she weeps wildly and passionately in her loneliness. She dares say no word of sympathy, dares show no sign; she, too, must appear cold, unmoved, uncaring.

"Oh, dear Heaven!" she prays in her sorrow and her pain. "Where will it end—where will it end? Will my strength endure for my life?"

She had never felt so helpless, so desperate as now.

She could not think of any course of action to pursue, and yet she knew she could not overlook this outrage to herself. That she should have under her roof as guest a woman whose position with her own husband she could no longer doubt, was impossible. All her pride rose in arms against such a possibility, and yet beyond all things she dreaded to explain to Sir Francis her reasons, and hear his hateful taunts and sneers against herself.

"And I am not blameless," she moans, pressing her hands against her hot and throbbing temples. "What can I say for myself?" As she kneels there, a knock comes at her door. She rises hurriedly, and opens it, and confronts—her husband.

He comes in. He does not look at her.

"Lauraine," he begins, "I just wanted to say a word to you. I have heard some bad news of young Athelstone I wanted to tell you. He has been dangerously ill—is lying alone and friendless at an hotel in Liverpool. I wish you would write and ask him to come here as soon as he can travel—it seems such a sad thing, you know."

He stops abruptly. He has repeated his lesson, and feels a little uncomfortable.

Lauraine lifts her head very proudly. Her voice, as

she speaks, goes through him like the touch of ice.

"Has Lady Jean counselled you to say all this? Her anxiety and—yours, for Mr. Athelstone are really most praiseworthy. All the same, you have had *his* answer to your disinterested invitation. It is scarcely necessary for me to repeat it, even if I wished."

He looks at her with a dark flush mounting to his brow, but flinches beneath the steady challenge of her eyes.

"What do you mean?" he demands hoarsely.

"I was in the library half-an-hour ago," says Lauraine calmly. "Only for a moment—do not fancy I stooped to intentional eaves-dropping. I think it is for you to say whether Lady Jean Salomans—or I—leave your house immediately."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THERE is a moment's silence, then Sir Francis turns and confronts her with a face of sullen rage.

"What the devil do you mean?" he says fiercely. "Are you going to insult her?"

"I think the insult is to me," says Lauraine, very quietly. "I have been blind a long time; but if you can discuss my actions with another woman in the familiar manner I heard you discussing them with Lady Jean, it says enough to convince me of the terms of your acquaintanceship. I have no desire for any open scandal. You can explain to your friend that her presence here is no longer desirable. That is all."

"All!" scoffs Sir Francis savagely. "And do you suppose I'm going to be dictated to by you as to who stops in my house, or not? A nice model of virtue and propriety *you* are, to preach to other women! A beggar, who married me for my money, just as one of the vilest women would have done—a woman who has been carrying on a secret intrigue of her own for years, only is too devilish clever to be found out."

Lauraine stops him with a gesture of infinite scorn.

"What you say is untrue. That I married you without any pretence of love, you know. I make no secret of it, and my mother and yourself both tried your utmost to persuade me into it. But since I married you, I have at least been true. Secret intrigues, as you call them, are for women of Lady Jean's stamp, not mine."

"And what about your own friendship for Keith?" sneers her husband. "Do you deny he is your lover?"

"No," answers Lauraine, turning very white, but still keeping her voice steady in its cold contempt. "But his love is worthy of the name; it is not a base, degrading passion that steeps itself in deceit—that, holding one face to the world, has another for the partner of its baseness. Keith has loved me from his boyhood. I was faithless to him, in a way; but I was not wholly to blame. For long after we met again I never suspected but that the old love was dead and buried. When I found it was not——" She stops abruptly, and a sudden angry light comes into her eyes. "Why do I stop to explain? You—you cannnot even imagine what a pure, self-denying love may be capable of! I think you have had your answer in his letter. He knows better than to palter with temptation. He has more respect for me, than you who claim to be—my husband."

His eyes droop in momentary shame, but the rage in his heart is boiling with fiercer fury. "A fine thing for you to talk to me of your love for another man—of his for you. Pshaw! as if all men's love is not alike. Do you take me for a fool? You never loved me, and since your child died we have been almost strangers, and you have had your lover with you often enough. That he has not accepted this invitation is to me no proof of what you call virtue. Perhaps he is tired of you. It is likely."

All the blood seems to rush from Lauraine's heart to her face at this insult. She confronts him with a passion of indignation. "How *dare* you?" she cries; and then something seems to rise in her throat and choke her. The utter futility of words—the sense of her own imprudence

—confront her like a barrier to the belief she would invoke. He sees he has stung her now almost beyond endurance, and the knowledge rouses all that is worst in him, and prompts but further outrage. That his own wrong-doing is discovered, that another woman has fallen where she—his wife—stood firm, are but added incentives to his jealous fury and defeated ends.

"How *dare* I? You will find that I dare more than that, madam. I think you would not look much better than I if we had a 'show up,' and as I live, if you insult Lady Jean I will institute proceedings against *you*—with Keith Athelstone as co-respondent."

And he leaves the room with a brutal laugh.

Lauraine stands there as if turned to stone. For the first time she feels how powerless she is—how helpless is any woman when the man who has sworn to protect and honour her, turns round on her and insults her with the very weakness he is bound to respect.

She knows her husband is not faithful that, the very presence of this woman beneath her roof is an outrage to all decency and morality, and yet if she opposes that presence, she herself is threatened with a life-long injury; nay, more, Keith will be dragged in to shield the sharer of this flagrant guilt, which is before her very eyes, and which she seems powerless to resent. She grows desperate as she thinks of it—as she looks at the case from every side, and yet sees no way of escape or justice.

Of what use is innocence to a woman whose name is before the world, and dragged through the mire of public inquiry? A thousand tongues will chatter, a thousand scandals fly, to be magnified and retailed and charged with vile suspicions. She will be a public sport, a public shame. And Lauraine knew that this would be her portion if she did not agree to hide the guilt of another woman, and tacitly accept the charge laid against herself. As she thought of it, all that was best and purest in her nature rose in revolt. All the courage and strength

that had given her power to resist her lover, seemed to array themselves against the brutal tyranny and shameful outrage she had been bidden to accept.

"I will not do it; I *will* not!" she cries aloud, as she paces to and fro her room. "After all I am rightly punished. I was false to him, and it was wrong to allow him to be so much with me, once I knew he loved me still. Now, whichever way I look at it, there seems nothing but shame and dishonour."

It seemed to her right—nay, but common justice—that she should suffer; but she hated to think of Keith being condemned to like torture, of the shame that would be about his life, did her husband carry out his threat. Where, indeed, would the results of this fatal love end? To what depths of misery had it not led, and still seemed to be leading them?

Divorce had always seemed to Lauraine a shameful thing—a necessary evil sometimes, but still something with a stigma of disgrace, that, whether merited or not, always dogged and haunted a woman all her life. And now she could plainly see to what end her husband and Lady Jean were driving her as their scapegoat.

By her means they wished to vindicate themselves; and, remembering how easily their plot might have been carried out, she shudders and turns sick with loathing and shame unutterable.

Keith, in his weakness and loneliness, might have been enticed here apparently by her wish. There would have been hours of languor and convalescence, during which they would have been together—hours when the softness of pity in her own heart and the awakened memories of his would have held all the old power, and all the long fought-against danger. But she sees still that the plot is not defeated, that she has a subtle foe to combat, and in all her scorn and wrath Lauraine yet feels the miserable conviction of her own impotence oppressing her.

The hours pass. Of time she takes no count or heed; only lies there prostrate and sick at heart, and desolate,

and ashamed; feeling that a great crisis in her life has come, and she cannot tell how to deal with it.

The luncheon-bell rings, but she sends a message that she is ill and cannot come downstairs. Another hour passes, and still she does not move, only lies there in a sort of stupor of misery and bewilderment.

There comes a gentle knock at the door, and she hears Lady Etwynde's voice asking permission to enter.

Wearily enough she gives it. All sympathy seems useless to her, and her friend's perfect happiness seems to show up in but sharper contrast her own wretched life.

Lady Etwynde guesses instinctively that something is wrong. Neither Lady Jean nor Lauraine has appeared at luncheon, and Sir Francis has looked like a human thundercloud all the time. She comes forward now and kneels by Lauraine's side.

"What has happened, dear?" she asks. "Are you ill?"

"Ill enough in mind," answers Lauraine, and then she tells her all. Lady Etwynde listens in silence, but her beautiful eyes grow dark with indignation and scorn.

"It is all that hateful woman, of course," she says at last. "Oh, my dear, my dear, what will you do now?"

"I cannot tell," says Lauraine despairingly. "Accept such an outrage as this, I cannot, and yet if I insist—well, I told you his threat."

"But that is absurd!" exclaims Lady Etwynde indignantly. "He has not a shadow of proof. No judge would listen to such a case. It is only a threat, Lauraine; and that woman has put him up to it."

"But in any case the disgrace would be the same," says Lauraine. "I was so blind, so foolish. Every one seems to have noticed Keith's devotion to me, and I—it was so long before I suspected it."

"The lookers-on always see most, you know. But still all this proves nothing, and I don't believe your husband would seriously think of dragging his name and

yours into one of those courts without a tittle of evidence to support his accusation."

"Evidence can be bought," says Lauraine; "and even were it to come to nothing, there is the shame, the scandal. Oh, my poor Keith! It was an evil fate that threw us two together again."

For a moment Lady Etwynde is silent. She is deeply troubled. She knows well enough that, be a woman ever so innocent, the breath of public discussion will tarnish her fame for ever A sense of injustice, of anger, rises in her heart, and fills it with hot, indignant thoughts.

"I cannot counsel you to submit," she says.

"I do not mean to submit," answers Lauraine tranquilly. "It would look like fear. I must face the worst. For myself, I do not care so much; I have been unhappy so long—but it is of Keith I think."

"My dear!" exclaims Lady Etwynde, "spare your pity! A man never suffers in these cases; it is always the woman—always. The more guiltless, the more society will shun her. It is a sort of way it has for condoning its own errors and impurities. It looks well to make a violent outcry when any one has been so foolish as to be found out. As long as you sin in the dark, no one will dream of saying a word, let their suspicions be ever so strong A woman like you, Lauraine, who has only been imprudent and sorely tempted, and yet dares to be virtuous, will receive no mercy and gain no belief."

"I know that," she says, and her indifference is scarcely forced now. She feels too hopeless for strong emotion.

"As for Keith," goes on Lady Etwynde impatiently, "it is all owing to his selfishness and——"

"Hush!" cries Lauraine sternly. "I will not have him blamed. He has been sorely tried, and many men would have acted far worse. It is on me that all the blame lies—on me only. It all began from the fatal error of my marriage, and I deserve to suffer, I know; only sometimes, Etwynde," she adds wearily, "it does

seem as if the suffering was beyond my strength."

The tears spring to Lady Etwynde's eyes.

"What *will* you do?" she asks despairingly.

"To-morrow I will tell Lady Jean that it is best for her visit to terminate," answers Lauraine. "I do not see why I should condone my own shame. As for the consequences, Sir Francis must do what he pleases. I know I am innocent, even if blameable—the result, time will show."

"I think you are quite right," says Lady Etwynde. "But I am afraid you will suffer for it. Lady Jean is a dangerous woman to offend."

Lauraine pushes the hair off her temples as if the weight oppressed her. "I do not expect anything else but suffering now. And I may as well endure it for right as for wrong. If I have respected my husband's name, at least he might respect mine."

"And whatever you do be sure of this," says Lady Etwynde gently: "my house is always open to you. Let the whole world turn its back upon you, Lauraine, my friendship will never fail." Lauraine looks up at the beautiful face. Her heart is too full for words.

But when she is alone again a great fear chills her. "I have done right," she says. "But—what will it cost?"

CHAPTER XXIX

ALL through that day Lauraine keeps in her own room. Sir Francis does not approach her. He is quite confident that his threat has taken effect—that she will never proceed to extremities. He has not seen Lady Jean to tell her of his wife's discovery, and he dares not send her another message. When he goes down to dinner he finds his wife in the drawing-room. She looks very pale, and is dressed in black velvet. Lady Etwynde is beside her, and Colonel Carlisle is standing near.

Sir Francis has scarcely entered the room when Lady Jean follows. She and Lauraine have not met that day. She walks up to her hostess, extending her hand.

Lauraine draws her slender figure up to its full height, and, with a cold bow, turns aside to speak to Colonel Carlisle. For an instant Lady Jean looks at her as if stunned. Then the blood rushes in a torrent to her face and neck. She knows the meaning of such an action only too well. Dinner is announced now, and Sir Francis, who has also observed this act of his wife's, offers his arm to Lady Jean. Colonel Carlisle does the same to Lauraine, and Lady Etwynde follows.

The dinner is a dreary affair. Each of them feels a scene is impending, and Colonel Carlisle, who has some inkling of how matters stand, is very uncomfortable. He resolves that on the morrow Etwynde and himself must quit Falcon's Chase, sorry as he is for, and much as he admires, Lauraine. The ladies rise to leave the table, and pass out of the room. Before entering the drawing-room Lady Jean bends down to Lauraine.

"Will you be good enough to explain the meaning of your strange behaviour?" she says.

Lauraine turns and faces her unflinchingly. "You must excuse me from entering upon any discussion with you," she says haughtily. "You will find a note in your own apartment that will fully explain everything —not that I fancy such explanation is needed."

Lady Jean's handsome, sparkling face changes to a dull, ashy grey. She to be insulted thus, to her face, and by a woman whom she despises and hates as a rival! Her teeth clench like a vice. She is too wise to bandy words; she only turns and walks straight to her own suite of rooms, and there sees the letter spoken of. Tearing it open like a fury, she reads the few curt lines in which Lauraine states that circumstances render it advisable her visit should come to an end, and refers her, for any explanation she may deem necessary, to Sir Francis.

To say that Lady Jean is furious would but ill convey an idea of the tempest of rage, hatred, and spite aroused in her heart by the knowledge that she is discovered.

"How could she have found out, and so suddenly?"

she mutters to herself. "He had no letters of mine to leave about. I was never such a fool as to write to him, and to-day she has been shut up in her rooms, and I have not met Frank. Ah, the library—I forgot that. Good heavens! could she have overheard?"

She trembles with mingled rage and shame. If Lauraine had stood before her now she could have killed her without a regret, crushed out her youth and beauty with ruthless hands and rejoicing heart; but Lauraine is not there, and Lauraine has all the triumph, and she all the shame and defeat. Like a wounded tigress she paces to and fro her room, a thousand schemes and projects flashing through her brain, and all the fierceness and savagery of her nature roused into an insensate, furious longing to revenge this insult, as she terms it, upon the woman who has dealt it to her.

And at this moment, and while she is in this mood, Sir Francis enters.

Lady Jean turns upon him like a beautiful fury. "So —you have been fool enough to let her find out," she says, in a low, choked voice. "Read that."

He glances over his wife's letter. He is enraged also. He had not thought she would have courage to act like this. "By Heaven! she shall suffer for it!" he mutters savagely. "She has dared to defy me, after all!"

"Defy you?" echoes Lady Jean. "Did you know then?"

"Certainly; I knew since the morning," he answers. "She was in the library—she heard us."

"Did I not tell you, you were an imbecile," screams Lady Jean, "to send me a message—to ask me to come to that room; and now—now— Great Heaven! what am I to do? I am ruined, and all through your idiocy?"

A woman always turns round on a man when there is a question of inconvenience to herself. Sir Francis stands there sullen and raging, but he is equally at a loss what to counsel. "I am master here," he says presently. "You shall not go."

Lady Jean laughs in his face. "Master here?—oh, no

doubt! You should have exercised your mastership in time, then; now it is too late. Your wife and I cannot remain under the same roof. Why, do you suppose that for a single moment I should stay to put up with her insults? Are you really such a fool? No; it is good-bye to you both from to-night, only don't let her *dare* to breathe a word of this to the world, or it will be the very worst day of her life—that I swear!"

"Good-bye!—what do you mean?" says sir Francis stupidly. "Do you think I am going to give you up for that puling, white-faced piece of virtue who calls herself my wife? By Heaven, no!"

"You seem to forget that you were mad to have that same puling, white-faced nonentity for your wife once upon a time!" sneers Lady Jean. "You bought your toy, and now must keep it. I leave your roof to-morrow, and never again do we two meet, unless——"

She pauses meaningly. He seizes her by the arm.

"Don't drive me desperate. You know I cannot give you up. You shall not—must not go. I have a hold on Lauraine. She is afraid. There is all that about—Keith."

Lady Jean shakes off his hand and laughs mockingly. "About Keith! Pshaw! They were too wise for us, *mon ami*. Don't fancy you can do anything there. Of course they were in love—every one knows that; but I doubt if you have a handle for a 'case,' if that is what you mean. And if Lauraine were afraid of you, would she have written—this?"

She stands before him—that letter in her hand, and all that is worst in her whole nature roused and stung by the justice that she deems an insult. Sir Francis is quite at a loss. That Lauraine has so coolly disregarded his threats seems to augur her own fearlessness and her own innocence. He feels an involuntary respect for her despite his anger and the fury of baffled schemes. It had never occurred to him that she would be brave enough to act thus. She has openly defied him, and that defiance rouses in him a longing for vengeance—a hatred of the purity of

principle that has been tempted and yet stood firm—that in the weakness of a woman's nature had been strong as never was his manhood; that confronts him now unshamed and undaunted, and ready to bear the cost of the most terrible vengeance that could present itself to a woman of Lauraine's nature.

"Would she?" persists Lady Jean, enraged at his silence. "Afraid!—she is fearless enough, trust her. She has been too clever for us both, and there remains nothing for it but to make the best of it. I will have no scene, no scandal. I leave your house to-morrow, and never again do I set foot in it, or receive you."

"And you think I will suffer this?" cries Sir Francis. "That I am going to part from a woman I love for the sake of one I hate?"

"I think you cannot help yourself," answers Lady Jean coolly. "I mean what I have said. Now—go. I don't want to create further scandal, and your presence here at this time is somewhat singular, to say the least."

"Jean, do not drive me mad!" cried Sir Francis desperately. "You are clever, keen of wit. Surely you can devise some plan by which we can defeat her? It is humiliating, unbearable to be baffled like this."

"She has seen through our scheme; she is prepared," scoffs Lady Jean. "Don't praise me for keen wits or cleverness, *mon ami*; you can admire them more safely as exemplified by your wife! Now—will you go?"

"Not unless you tell me when I am to see you again."

"Never, never, never!" almost screams Lady Jean. "Is that enough? *Never again*, I swear, unless your wife is—to all intents and appearances—what she has deemed me! As that will never be, I think you must resign yourself as philosophically as possible to an eternal parting."

"How heartless you are!" cries Sir Francis. "You cannot mean it. We might meet sometimes. There is no kind of——"

"Oh, fool—dolt!" cries Lady Jean, in a fury. "Have

I not said enough? It is to you I owe this insult. You can pay the penalty of it. You have nothing to do now but put up with your bargain, or—wait for freedom!"

"Freedom," he mutters, vaguely and stupidly. "Do you mean that I should try for a divorce?"

She opens the door and pushes him aside. "I have said all that is necessary. It is for you to act!"

"Act," he says. For a moment he hesitates, then goes forward and firmly closes the door. "I will *not* go till I have said my say. I warned Lauraine that if she did this I would proceed to extremities. I shall do so. She has defied me for the first time in her life. Well, she shall suffer for it. If you leave my roof she leaves it too. She has chosen to insult you; let her have her share of the disgrace."

Lady Jean looks at him as if bewildered.

"I think you know very well what I mean," he says gloomily. "You were the first to counsel it."

"But the scandal, the disgrace," cries Lady Jean hurriedly. "And then all this will leak out, and it will look like a trumped-up case, done to shield yourself. And my name—— No, no, I cannot have it. She is right. Let her have her triumph; it won't last long. There are other ways to punish her besides this. Leave it to me. I must be calm. I must think. No; *that* idea is ridiculous. You may drag her name through the dirt, but you drag your own also, and she can always bring up—this. And, though I hate her, I know she is a good woman. She is cold; that is her safeguard, for she never loved you. But all the same she will not forfeit her own self-respect. It is only another sort of pride, but it is *safe*."

"And yet you always said——" begins Sir Francis.

"Said," and she laughs her old mocking laugh. "Of course I *said*, of course I say it still; but then proofs are different. She loves Keith Athelstone, and he loves her; and you—love me. It is a triangle that you can't make into a square. She has the best of it now. Let her alone, and let her triumph. It may be my turn next."

Infatuated as Sir Francis is, something in the cold, measured hatred of this woman's last words strikes upon him with a chill almost of fear. He would rather have seen her furious, violent, tempestuous, than as she looked now. She was not the sort of woman to care for a "waiting race," and he knew some deeper purpose underlaid her words. She turns on him suddenly again, and stamps her foot. "*Will* you go? Do you wish to disgrace me publicly? Have I not suffered enough at your hands?"

"But you will write; you will tell me where you are?" he implores.

"Yes—yes; I will write. Only go. I must be alone; I must think. And to-morrow I leave. Arrange all that." He leaves her then, and Lady Jean rings her bell and bids her maid pack immediately; she has received news that necessitates her return to Paris.

Early next morning she leaves the Chase.

Her hostess does not appear, or send any message of farewell. Sir Francis drives his guest away to the station. He has not seen or spoken to his wife.

"You have triumphed," says Lady Etwynde, standing by Lauraine's side, and watching the carriage as it disappears down the great oak avenue.

"Triumphed?" Lauraine sighs heavily as she turns her aching eyes away from the dark forest glades that stretch for miles around. "It is a poor triumph, Etwynde, and laden with bitter memories, and weighted with many fears. Something tells me that I shall suffer for this before long." And Lady Etwynde echoes that fear in her own heart, though now she speaks all brave and cheering words that her tender love can frame.

"How will it end?" she thinks despairingly. "How will it end?" Perhaps it was well that she could not tell at that hour, in that time.

CHAPTER XXX

"WHY does Lauraine not come to town?" says Mrs. Douglas, impatiently, to Lady Etwynde. "She must be

moped to death in that dreary Northumberland place. It gives me the horrors even to think of it."

It is a cold afternoon in February, and it is Lady Etwynde's "day," but the æsthetes are deserting her now. Her marriage is fixed for the end of the month. It is to be very quiet, and Lauraine has written to say she cannot come to it; her health is so delicate, that all excitement and fatigue are forbidden. But the real truth is, that Sir Francis has developed a new system of tyranny, framed in by every species of insulting suspicion, and has ordered Lauraine to remain at Falcon's Chase, and declared she shall not even go up to London for the season. It is childish, it is cowardly, and it is unreasonable, and he knows it is all these; but he is infuriated with her, and savage at the failure of his schemes, and this is the only sort of revenge that he can think of at present. He himself is in Paris, with all the gaieties and amusements of the season awaiting his selection, but chafing inwardly and fiercely at Lady Jean's strange conduct, and complete avoidance of himself.

Of course she goes nowhere—her deep mourning compels retirement—but she has a small circle of friends who come to her afternoons in her pretty rooms in the Rue Victoire, and Sir Francis knows this, and knows that he is always excluded, and the fact makes him more irritable, more bitter against his wife, and more impatient of seeing his mistress than he has ever been since they parted at the Chase. "How long am I to wait?" he wonders impatiently. "What can be her meaning?"

As yet neither of these questions seemed destined to be answered.

"I know there is something," persists Mrs. Douglas, drawing near to the fire in the pretty artistic drawing-room, and dropping her voice confidentially. "It looks so odd, and Sir Francis is never with her now. Do tell me, Lady Etwynde, was there anything—anything wrong—when you were down there at Christmas?"

"I think Lauraine is most unhappy," says Lady

Etwynde sorrowfully ; " and I think her marriage was a great mistake. I often heard you congratulating yourself and her—on its brilliance, Mrs. Douglas ; but I think, could you see behind the scenes and look into your daughter's breaking heart, you would not feel quite so proud, or so satisfied respecting it."

Mrs. Douglas looks at her annoyed and impatient.

" If she is unhappy it must be her own fault. She had everything that could make a woman happy, and her husband was devoted to her. If she has lost his affection, it is by her own imprudence and folly. I warned her long ago how it would be."

" Perhaps your warning came too late. Most warnings do," says Lady Etwynde coldly. " But a loveless marriage to a girl of Lauraine's disposition and nature was a dangerous experiment. You ought to have let her marry Keith Athelstone."

Mrs. Douglas' eyes flash angrily. " I suppose you are in her confidence. I acted for the best. Keith was always wild and rash, and not at all a suitable match ; and, besides that, she was not in love with him—or, at least, never told me so. She was quite content to marry Sir Francis."

" She could have known nothing of his reputation, then," answers Lady Etwynde. " He was always a bad, fast man ; and he has treated Lauraine abominably."

Mrs. Douglas looks at her with increased curiosity. " What has he done ? Is it about—Lady Jean ? "

" Yes," answers Lady Etwynde, colouring. " Lauraine knows now what the world has long suspected ; and when she would not allow that woman to remain under her roof, Sir Francis threatened her with proceedings and dragged in poor Keith Athelstone's name."

" Good Heavens ! " exclaims Mrs. Douglas, " what scandal—what horror ! Oh, surely he is not in earnest ? Why, Lauraine is a fool—a perfect fool ! Why did she make a scene about it ? Of course, every one knows such things happen constantly. Men are never faithful—

never! But to insult the woman—and for what good? To think that a daughter of mine should have been such an idiot?"

"It does seem remarkable, doesn't it?" says Lady Etwynde dryly. "You see women nowadays generally prefer worldly advantage to their own self-respect."

"Self-respect! Fiddlesticks!" cries Mrs. Douglas, growing more and more irate. "Will self-respect give her her present position, or gain the world's belief in her innocence if she is once in the Divorce Court? Self-respect! I hate such rubbish. She had everything she wanted; why could she not have been content?"

"I dare say *you* would never understand why," answers Lady Etwynde calmly. "Lauraine is singularly unlike yourself."

"Lauraine is a fool—a perfect fool!" cries Mrs. Douglas furiously. "To get herself into a scrape like this, and all for nothing; to insult a woman of Lady Jean's position, and then to get herself talked about as she's done with that young idiot Keith, and simply because of some childish folly long ago, when they fancied themselves in love with each other! Why, she must have taken leave of her senses, and all this time she has not said a word to me—her own mother!"

Lady Etwynde is silent. She is thinking it would have been stranger still if Lauraine *had* taken her mother into her confidence.

"I am sure Sir Francis was always most kind to her," resumes Mrs. Douglas presently. "Always when I have seen them together."

"I believe it is not a rule in good society for husband and wife to quarrel openly," remarks Lady Etwynde.

"She should have been content and sensible like other people," goes on Mrs. Douglas, disregarding the interruption. "Good gracious, every one knows such things go on. You can't make saints of men. You must take them as they are. And did she actually make Lady Jean leave the house?"

"She would have been scarcely less guilty than Lady Jean had she condoned her presence, knowing what she knew," says Lady Etwynde, with rising indignation. "Even if a husband does not love his wife, he at least should treat her with common decency."

"I daresay Lauraine brought it all on herself. A man can't always put up with such airs as those to which she treated Sir Francis, and, in contrast with Lady Jean, why Lauraine was—nothing."

"No," agrees Lady Etwynde. "A good woman and pure-minded generally looks colourless and tame beside a wicked one. The contrast is too strong I suppose."

Mrs. Douglas looks at her sharply. She does not like her tone, nor understand it.

"Well, I only hope it will come right," she says. "I shall write to Lauraine and advise her to make it up with her husband. It is so stupid, making a fuss and *exposé*—losing everything, and all for—what?"

"I think," says Lady Etwynde quietly, "that you do not understand your daughter, and you do her injustice. A woman must know when to support her own dignity; I suppose you allow that?"

"I daresay Lauraine made a great deal of unnecessary fuss; it would be just like her. She is full of romance and high-flown ideas. If she had been quite circumspect herself it would not matter; but after getting herself talked about with Keith—I myself had to warn her—I think Sir Francis was very good to overlook it."

"Sir Francis perhaps had his own aims to attain," interpolates Lady Etwynde. "I am inclined to think so, judging by results."

"Do you mean—do you really think he wishes for freedom?" gasps Mrs. Douglas. "Is it so bad as that?"

"Lady Jean seems to have infatuated him," answers Lady Etwynde. "He was always weak where women were concerned, you know. He has treated Lauraine very badly and he is even now in Paris."

"I think I will go down to Falcon's Chase," says Mrs.

Douglas presently. "I must see Lauraine and advise her. It is really most critical. I had no idea things were so bad. She has not chosen to take me into her confidence; still, as her mother, it is my duty to see she does not ruin her whole future."

"I think," says Lady Etwynde, very quietly, "I would not go if I were you."

"Why not?" demands Mrs. Douglas sharply.

"She might not like it," answers Lady Etwynde; "and you can do no good—no one can. Lauraine is proud, but she is also high-principled. I do not think you need fear for her. What is right to do she will do, at any cost. Sir Francis has not carried out his threat, and I fancy he won't. He has ordered Lauraine to remain in Northumberland; but I do not think that is any great punishment to her. She always loved the Chase, and all her memories of her child are with it."

"It is a pity the child died," says Mrs. Douglas.

"You may well say that. He would at least have been some consolation to her now. Not that it would have made any difference to Sir Francis. He never cared for the boy. Still it was a tie."

"Lauraine *must* have been in fault," complains Mrs. Douglas fretfully. "It is all nonsense to say she is a martyr—Sir Francis was no worse than other men. If she had been less cold, less odd, he would never have run after other women."

"I do not agree with you," interrupts Lady Etwynde. "Sir Francis is just what he always was—a thoroughly selfish man, and a man whose habits are ingrained in every fibre of his nature. He has never treated women with any respect, and his passion for Lauraine was as short-lived as any of his other fancies. He married her because—well, you know the real reason as well as you know the man, and in two years he was tired of her. For a woman, young, beautiful, warm-hearted, she has had a most trying life, and a most cruel experience. Had she indeed been what hundreds of others are, she might

have consoled herself easily enough; but she could not do that, and—she has her reward."

Mrs. Douglas is silent and uncomfortable. "It is a great pity," she says at last. A great pity. And one can really do nothing?"

"Nothing, except wait and hope."

Then the door opens and Colonel Carlisle enters, and a beautiful flush and light come over her face as she greets him. Mrs. Douglas looks at her radiant eyes and sees his proud and tender glance, and hears the happy ring in their answering voices, and as she goes out and leaves them alone a little uncomfortable feeling rises in her heart. "Is there something in love, after all?" she asks herself.

"What has that woman been saying?" asks Colonel Carlisle, as the door closes and he seats himself by his betrothed. "You looked worried when I came in."

"She always does worry me, I think," says Lady Etwynde, nestling closer to his side, as the strong arm draws her towards him. "She is so worldly, so cold, so heartless; and I hate to hear a mother speak of her daughter as she speaks of Lauraine."

"They seem totally unlike each other," says the Colonel. "Poor Lauraine! Have you any news?"

"I had a letter this morning. She cannot come up for our marriage. Of course, Sir Francis won't let her—that is the real truth. It is a little bit of spite on his part."

"What an unfortunate marriage that was!" exclaims Colonel Carlisle involuntarily. "Ah, my darling, thank God that we shall have love and sympathy on which to base ours. There is no hell upon earth like a union where there is no love, no respect, no single thought or feeling shared in common—where one's nature revolts and one's duty demands submission—where the sacredness of home is violated every hour until the name becomes a mockery——"

"Poor Lauraine!—what she has missed!" Lady Etwynde sighs.

"She had not your constancy, my darling!" murmurs her lover. "To think that for all these years you held me shrined in the proud little heart that I thought so cold and unforgiving once! How true a love was yours!"

"It had need to be true if it was so unforgiving," she says, smiling up into the dark eyes that search her own. "When I think of those long, wasted years——"

"Do not think of them," he interrupts passionately, "or think of them only to crowd into those that are to come, a double portion of the love they have missed."

And with his lips on hers she is content, indeed, that it should be so.

CHAPTER XXXI

ALONE in her rooms in Paris, Lady Jean sits perplexing herself over ways and means. She is awfully in debt, even though she has let the country-house, and supplemented her income by another five hundred a year. She is angry with herself for having refused Sir Francis' assistance and too proud to call him to her side. She can think of no scheme by which to baffle Lauraine, and though she knows her rival is condemned to a species of exile, and that she is as unhappy as a woman can well be, that in no way comforts her for the fact of her own defeat.

Her position is full of peril and uncertainty. She can no longer float on the smooth waters of Society, for Society is shocked and outraged by her husband's misdeeds, and an ill odour clings to her name. The people she gathers round her now are not at all the class of people she prefers. Needy foreigners, second-rate celebrities; Englishmen with shady reputations and tarnished titles; French Bohemians who have known and admired her in the days of her success—all these congregate together at her little rooms in the Rue Victoire; and among them all she looks for some willing tool who will lend himself to her hand and work out her schemes.

But for long she looks in vain.

The winter passes on. The cool, fresh days of early spring are heralded by bursts of sunshine, by the tender budding leafage of the Boulevards, by the scents and hues of flowers that are piled up in the baskets of the market women, and fill the windows of the *fleuristes* with brilliance and beauty once again. And in the springtime, suddenly and without warning, Lady Jean's scheme of vengeance comes to her as a vision of possibility at last, for who should come to Paris but Keith Athelstone.

He has been wintering in the south of France. He comes to the gay city with no set purpose, or desire. He is alone, and melancholy, and depressed. He thinks he will have a fortnight in Paris, and then start for that long-projected American tour, and the first person he sees and greets in Paris is the Lady Jean.

She has never been a favourite of his, and he is inclined to be curt and avoid her. But she had other schemes in her head, and, unless a man is absolutely discourteous, it is not easy for him to baffle a woman who has set her mind upon deluding him, especially a woman clever and keen as the Lady Jean.

She is very quiet, very subdued. All the fastness and wildness seem to have evaporated. She tells him of her bereavement, her troubles. She speaks sympathizingly of his own, and brings in Lauraine's name so gently and gradually that he cannot take alarm at it. In the end he accepts an invitation to her house. And finds everything so subdued, so decorous, in such perfect good taste, that he thinks Lady Jean's widowhood has produced most salutary effects.

In his present mood gaiety and fastness would have jarred upon, and disgusted him. As it is, all is toned down, chastened, soothing, and in perfect taste. He comes again, and yet again. Lady Jean keeps the foreigners, and shady adventurers, and the Bohemian element carefully out of his sight, and she herself treats him with that consideration and deference always flattering to a young man's feeling when displayed by a woman older

than himself, and still beautiful. She mentions the Vavasours casually, Lauraine as being immersed in worldly gaieties. Sir Francis as being abroad at Monte Carlo. The latter fact is true, he having proceeded there in disgust at her obstinacy and coldness, and yet not liking to break with her entirely, because she happens to be the only woman of whom he has never tired.

The fortnight passes, and Keith still lingers. Life has no special object for him at present. The spring has turned cold and bleak, and the American tour may await his own convenience.

One evening he comes to Lady Jean by special invitation. There are a few people there; there is a little music, and a little "play," not very high, not very alarming; but Keith refuses it for a reason that no one there guesses. Play had been a passion with him once. Its dangerous excitement had lured him into the most terrible scrape of that "wild youth" to which Mrs. Douglas is so fond of alluding. Once free of that early trouble, he had solemnly promised Lauraine never to touch card or dice again, and he has kept his word. Lady Jean does not press him, though she looks surprised at his refusal. She sits with him in a dim corner of the room, and lures him on to talk to her as he has done of late.

Watching them with anger and suspicion are two fierce eyes, the eyes of a certain Count Karolyski, of whom no one knows anything except that he is a Hungarian, an expert card player, and a deadly shot.

The count is a devoted admirer of the Lady Jean's. The Count has been first in favour with her for months past, and the Count looks with extreme wrath on this young stripling who appears to have supplanted him, and who is so serenely unconscious of the fact.

The refusal to play irritates him still more. He knows Keith is very rich, and had hoped to revenge his wounded feelings by fleecing him with ease. Keith has frustrated this agreeable project and that fact rankles in the Count's breast, beneath the expanse of white linen and glitter-

ing orders that adorn it so lavishly. The evening goes on. Wine is handed round and freely drunk. A little more noise and freedom than usual pervade the pretty, gilded rooms. Lady Jean gets somewhat uneasy. She contrives to get rid of Keith; it does not suit her purpose that he should think of her as anything but highly decorous. When he leaves and she comes back, Count Karolyski throws down his cards, declaring he is tired of play, and comes over to her side.

"You are cruel, madame," he says in French. "You have deserted us the whole evening."

She throws herself back in her chair with a little laugh. "Cruel! You had better amusement than my company."

"Amusement! It is not that," he says, with an ardent glance from his dark, flashing eyes. "You are cold—fickle. You are breaking my heart for the sake of that American boy."

She interrupts him with pretended indignation. "Count, you forget yourself! I permit no one to arraign my actions."

"Far be it from me to do that. I would not offend you for worlds, madame; but I cannot refrain from expressing my feelings when I see your old friends thrust aside and forgotten, for sake of a beardless youth to whom Fortune has been kinder than to us."

"I do not forget my friends," says Lady Jean, with a quick glance; "and I am only civil to this boy because he is friendless and alone, and I took pity on his solitude."

"Your pity, madame, may be a dangerous favour. To those whom you really compassionate, exclusion would be the greater mercy."

"Every one is not as foolish as yourself, Count," she says with a soft glance.

It is pleasant to hear she is still beautiful—still can play the part of an "apple of discord" to men.

"Because, perhaps, 'every one' has not found your presence what I have found it."

"Hush!" she says softly; "you are talking folly, and you know it. The days are over when I believed in compliments."

"You do not suppose I am insulting you by anything so commonplace? Compliment is the language of fools and flatterers. I am speaking the plain unvarnished truth."

"Truth!" and she laughs lightly; "who speaks the truth now? It is as old-fashioned a virtue as honesty."

"Unless one finds it impossible to act indifference."

"Come, Count," she says good-humouredly, "we know each other too well to talk in this strain. We are all *bons camarades* here; no sentiment, and no seriousness. I gave you credit for more sense than to fear you would break through the rule."

His brows contract with a sudden angry frown.

"You do not mean what you say! A woman like yourself cannot set bounds to a man's admiration, or check his feelings by ridicule. I have scoffed at sentiment all my life as a thing fit only for boys and women. But all that I have hitherto disdained has amply revenged my past indifference. And you—you have not discouraged me, madame?"

Her heart beats high. A sudden warm colour comes into her face beneath its delicate rouge; but not from any gratification at the homage—not for any reason that makes him interpret these signs as flattering to himself. Only because she sees herself a step further on the road of her vengeance—only because triumph whispers to her that the end is not far off.

She rises after those last words, laughing still. "I do not believe in love, monsieur, any more than yourself. No one has been able to convert me. To parody an old saying, with me it is only a case of '*La reine s'amuse.*'"

"And is this boy only a plaything also?" he says, with an angry sneer.

"Of course. Is he not a charming one?" she says

with sudden gravity. "So earnest and credulous; quite refreshing. We have so long passed that stage of life, *nous autres.*"

"With women like yourself for teachers is that a matter of wonder, madame?"

"Now you are sarcastic, and that is horrid. Why, Count, I do believe you are jealous of my pretty boy! I thought you were wiser than that."

And laughing her soft, amused laughter, she passes on into the card-room, leaving him standing there with the mellow lamplight on his dark, passionate face, and shining in the lurid depths of his eyes. At that moment he hates her and himself, and hates tenfold more the man he has chosen to consider as his rival.

It had been true, as he had said, that he had deemed himself above all such weaknesses, until the fascination of this woman had entered into his life and fired his soul with a passion, sudden, wild, fierce, and absorbing even as it was revengeful. To win her he would have done much. He was not a poor man, though far from being rich, as Lady Jean counted riches. Still he was of good birth, and boasted of pure Magyar descent, and had noble and ancient estates in Hungary, and thought himself no ill match for the daughter of a poor Irish Earl. But that Lady Jean should encourage his homage and then ridicule it, filled him with fierce anger.

He leaves her room that night with a cold farewell, and for two days does not approach her at all.

Lady Jean is amused. It is what she expected, and she does not resent it. She sees Keith daily now—in fact, takes care that she shall see him, for she is not desirous that he should escape her toils.

Against his judgment, against his better reason, Keith Athelstone submits to her caprices and permits her to draw him to her presence. He is unfortunately in that state of mind in which a man is easily influenced by a woman if she is sympathetic, friendly, and appears interested in him. At present nothing seems of much

consequence or account. The fierce suffering of the last two years has been lulled into a sort of quiescence. The good resolutions formed during that period of languor and convalescence have taken just sufficient root to strengthen him as far as Lauraine is concerned, and with that self-sacrifice they end.

Life looks very monotonous, very dreary at present, and there is just a little fillip given to its monotony by Lady Jean. It is not that he likes her—it is not that he respects her, but he drifts into a sort of intimacy before he really knows it, and she is always at hand to sustain her influence. And it so happens that all this comes to the ears of Lauraine, filtered through the letters of mutual friends, put in as spice to various gossip detailed to her from Paris.

At first she cannot believe it. It seems too horrible; but unfortunately a letter comes from Lady Etwynde, radiant in the flush and glory of her matronly honours, and revelling in Paris delights with her handsome husband; and that letter mentions casually the same thing. "Keith Athelstone has been driving in the Bois with Lady Jean;" "I have met Keith, and asked him to dinner, but he excused himself on the plea of a previous engagement with Lady Jean," etc., etc.

Lady Etwynde tells her this, thinking it may really keep her from brooding over the idea that she has ruined her young lover's life; but had she known the torture it would have inflicted, she would have been silent on the subject.

Lady Etwynde's idea of Keith Athelstone has always been that he is selfish and inconsiderate, and that Lauraine is quite thrown away upon him; she feels convinced now of her own sagacity when she sees how foolish is his conduct. She herself takes no notice of Lady Jean, and when Keith excuses himself to her on the plea before mentioned, she feels disgusted and annoyed, and tells her husband she will have nothing more to say to the young man. She would have been

civil to him for Lauraine's sake, but if he prefers Lady Jean, why to Lady Jean let him go.

"I knew he would never be constant," she says complainingly. "Really, men are too horrible."

"With one exception," smiles Colonel Carlisle, looking proudly at the bright, petulant face, that seems to have regained all its old sparkling witchery and youthfulness with the "old" happiness.

"Ah, Cyril, there is no one like you!" she answers.

"My darling," he says. "Every woman says that of the man she loves, and every man of the woman. I think you are hard upon poor Keith. Fancy, to love a woman with all one's heart and soul, and know she can be nothing to one. Ah heaven! how fatal a thing is marriage sometimes—how *sure* one ought to be of oneself before entering into a life-long union."

"*We* are sure!" she murmurs, softly nestling closer in his arms, as they stand side by side in the twilight shadows."

"Thank God, we are!" he says, with passionate earnestness. "But often and often I think, if it had not been for the sins and follies of the past—for the wrong and the suffering—our love would never have been as deep and intense a thing as it is. I shall never forget those years, and how hopelessly our lives seemed severed—with what reluctance I came home to England—how I dreaded to hear you were another's—and then——"

"After all I was your own," she whispers.

"And we are so happy," he resumes presently. "Are we not, my queen of æsthetes?"

She laughs a little tremulously. "Indeed, yes; but I fear, dearest, the queen has sadly neglected her subjects. Women's missions are all very well until men interfere with them. Then there is a lamentable failure of all the grand schemes and projects."

"A woman's first mission is to love her husband and make his home a paradise," answers Colonel Carlisle. "I am not great at poetry, as you know, but I own

to an admiration of those lines of Tennyson in 'The Princess.' You know them:

> For woman is not undevelopt man,
> But diverse; could we make her as the man
> Sweet Love were slain; his dearest bond is this,
> Not like to like, but like in difference.
> Yet in the long years liker must they grow—
> The man be more of woman, she of man.
> * * * * *
> Till at the last she sets herself to man,
> Like perfect music unto noble words."

"Yes," she says. "They are very true, although a man wrote them."

"Don't you believe our sex understands yours, then?" he asks teasingly.

"No; I do not," she says decidedly. "I think no man yet ever quite comprehended a woman's nature, any more, perhaps, than we comprehend a man's. I think that is how we so often mistake and misjudge each other. We expect a man to act as we would act, and he expects us to act as he would; and that can never be. Another thing: we have such quick instincts, and are governed so often by sympathy or antipathy; *you* are slow in your judgment, and *reason* where we act."

"Yes," he answers thoughtfully; "but contrast is the salt of life, my darling. We should not find any attraction in each other if we were quite alike, and regulated our lives and actions on the same principles. But to return to our subject. I am certain Lady Jean is up to some mischief, and I would give anything in the world to get Keith Athelstone away from her influence. What *can* possess him to be always there?"

"Not always, dear," says his wife rebukingly. "Three times within a fortnight. I cannot understand it myself. I should like to give him a hint, but I am afraid. He might take offence, and I know what men are. Warn them against a woman, and they immediately run after her; try to turn them from a purpose, and they throw themselves heart and soul into it."

"You should treat them as the Irishman did his pigs—drive them one way and turn their heads another," laughs Colonel Carlisle. "But you surely don't imagine he cares about Lady Jean?"

"No; I give him credit for better sense. But she is a dangerous woman, and I am certain has some purpose in view. I know she hates Lauraine; I am equally certain that she knows of Keith's infatuation for her, and I feel convinced she is trying to work some mischief. You remember her plot about getting him to Falcon's Chase?"

"Yes. That was a piece of devilry, and no mistake. I have thought more of the young fellow since his refusal than ever I did before."

"Keith is a strange character," says Lady Etwynde; "so headstrong and passionate, yet so loving and true; so wild, and yet so easily controlled; so selfish, and yet so weak. Lauraine has a great influence over him—more than any one else has, I think. I believe when once she made him see things in their true light, once she showed him that the love that would dishonour a woman is the last love worthy of her acceptance, he would turn from what even seemed her *own* tempting. But he must have known it could not be that."

"Lauraine is a good, true woman, though she has made a fatal mistake in life, and now it is too late to remedy it," says the Colonel regretfully. "What sad words those are, 'too late!' Just to have missed all that makes life desirable, just to meet and love, and find that Fate has placed an impassable barrier between you and that love. Ah, me!"

"Don't sigh!" whispers his wife tenderly. "Our 'too late' was just in time after all."

"Thank God for that!"

"I do," she answers fervently. "But how my own happiness makes me regret her loss! I never thought I could love any woman so dearly as I love Lauraine; and I feel, oh! so sorry for her now!"

"So do I—for Keith."

"And you think we can do nothing?"

"I fear not. It is a delicate matter. He may be only striving for forgetfulness after all. Men do foolish and desperate things sometimes for love's sake."

"That is one of the things we women who love you can't understand," says Lady Etwynde. "To us those excesses to which we are accused of driving you seem degrading and contemptible. We can only excuse sins that are not against ourselves, I suppose."

"Doubtless it looks cowardly," says her husband, "to fling away our self-respect because something has not been as we wished it; but then that *something* is worth everything else in the world, or we think so, and losing it, all else seems of no account."

"In that respect we set you an example, do we not?" laughs his wife. "We don't go to perdition because we are disappointed in love."

"Because your natures are so different. The same rule cannot apply to a man and a woman. I thought we had agreed on that before," says Colonel Carlisle.

"So we had. Instance Keith and Lauraine."

"And my lady and—myself."

And he bends down and kisses the sweet red lips.

That closes the argument. They forget all about Keith and Lauraine; they talk now of their own love, and of each other.

CHAPTER XXXII

It is a week later. Lady Etwynde and her husband have left Paris and gone back to the æsthetic mansion in Kensington. They have decided on living there still. To Lady Etwynde it is endeared by many memories and associations, and her husband is content with whatever pleases her. Lady Jean is still in the gay city, and so is Keith Athelstone.

"How the affair drags!" murmurs the Lady Jean to herself one evening as she is making her toilette. "Karolyski is persevering, I can see; but Keith—he is quite too stupid. I must try and hasten the *dénouement.* Besides, Frank comes back in a few days, and I don't want *him* to suspect. Could I bring matters to an issue to-night, I wonder?"

She looks at herself in the glass, and a flush of triumph rises to her cheek. She looks supremely handsome in a dress of black satin, with judicious touches of white lace and white flowers; and as she sweeps into her rooms and sees Keith's involuntary glance of admiration, she feels a little thrill of triumph.

As the evening goes on, as her guests assemble, she contrives that Keith Athelstone should be always by her side, and though the scowling face of Count Karolyski is frequently turned towards her, she is by no means intimidated. He and Keith are mutually antagonistic to each other, and to-night the Count's manner is almost insulting.

Again, the question of play is mooted, and again he taunts Keith with his care of his dollars. The evening is very warm, and the young fellow has drunk more wine than he usually does, and Lady Jean has taken care that it is wine both strong and exciting.

At the Count's veiled sneers he loses his temper—never a very forbearing one—and, forgetful of promises and resolutions, sits down at the table.

The stakes grow higher; he is winning fast. Again and again he is victor and again and again does the money of the Count flow into his keeping. Lady Jean comes near him and leans against his chair. Her perfumed hair almost sweeps his cheek. As he glances up he meets all the dark intensity and lustre of her eyes.

"You are wonderfully fortunate in—everything," she says, smiling; and the Count glances up and crushes back an oath between his set teeth. Then quite suddenly, and with the most serene innocence, Lady Jean

stoops and picks up a card by Keith's side. "You have dropped this," she says, and lays it on the table.

"The ace of spades—you have already played that, monsieur!" says Count Karolyski.

"It cannot be mine, then," says Keith quietly.

The Count throws his cards contemptuously on the table.

"Monsieur's luck may be wonderful, but with double aces in his hand it is not so remarkable after all!"

Keith starts up—his hot young blood aflame: "What do you mean—do you dare insinuate——"

The Count's laugh falls across the horrified silence of the guests as they draw near.

"Insinuate? No, monsieur—it is for you to explain, I think."

"I have nothing to explain," says Keith proudly. "There is no proof that that card belonged to me. If you doubt my word, my honour, I am perfectly willing to answer for both."

"Hush! hush! what are you saying," cries Lady Jean, horrified. "Of course it is a mistake. Mr. Athelstone, pray be calm."

Calm! The hot blood is rushing through Keith's veins—his eyes have their worst and most passionate light. "Your friend has thought fit to insult me, madame," he says. "I demand an apology or—satisfaction."

"*Pardieu*, monsieur!" laughs the Count, in his most insulting manner. "I am sorry I cannot answer your first demand; as to the other—I am at your service."

There is an instant's silence. Women with blanched faces, men with surprise and embarrassment, look on these two who face each other—on the tall, slight figure with its dauntless grace of bearing, on the blue eyes flaming with anger and defiance; and then on the cruel, smiling lips, and calm, dark face of the Hungarian.

Count Karolyski turns, says a few words to a man

near by, and then, with a bow, leaves the room.

Keith turns to Lady Jean. "I regret that such a scene should have happened in your house," he says, calming his voice by a violent effort. "You will excuse my withdrawing now, madam?" She has grown very pale. As he quits the salon she follows him.

"Mr. Athelstone, do not proceed to extremities. The Count is a deadly shot. He has fought more duels than I could tell you—and you——"

"Do you fancy I am afraid?" interrupts Keith, turning his flashing eyes upon her face. "Or that I value my life so much, I would try to save it even for less cause? No; let him do his worst. An insult like that——"

"It was shameful, I know," says Lady Jean. "But still, you might leave Paris—you might——"

"For what do you take me?" interrupts Keith passionately. "Do you think I am a coward?"

"No; oh, no," she murmurs. "Only you are so young, and life is all before you. Why should you forfeit love, happiness, all that may be in store, just for a fancied insult that has questioned your honour?"

Keith looks at her searchingly. The old vague distrust of this woman is at work within his heart. He answers her very coldly.

"It *is* my honour I avenge. I do not fancy even you, as a woman, could counsel the acceptance of such an insult as your friend has thought fit to put upon me." And with a bow he leaves her presence.

CHAPTER XXXIII

An hour later. Lady Jean sits alone in her boudoir. Her guests have all gone. A flush of excitement burns on her cheek, her eyes look triumphant.

"Victory at last!" she murmurs to herself. "When *she* hears he is dead, and has met his death through my instrumentality, I think she will know that I too can

avenge insult. I have taken her husband and her lover from her. I said my hour would come. It *has* come."

There is a stir, a noise of footsteps without. The door is thrust hurriedly open, and Count Karolyski comes in. Involuntarily Lady Jean rises. She is annoyed and troubled, and a little afraid.

"Monsieur, you know I do not receive at this hour."

"So your people told me, but my business pleads an excuse. I will not detain you long, madame. I have come to say I will spare your—lover—on one condition."

"I do not understand you," falters Lady Jean, turning very pale. He smiles his cold and evil smile.

"No? Well, I will put it more plainly. I will retract my words. This duel shall not take place if you will be my wife."

She turns on him, angry and amazed. "Monsieur, you do me much honour. But what I have refused to love, I will scarcely yield to intimidation!"

He draws his breath sharply.

"Stay; listen to me. Take heed before you refuse. I have told you I have scoffed at love all my life till you taught me to recant my error. A man at my age does not love lightly, nor is he easily turned from his purpose. To win you I would do anything—to lose you drives me desperate. If you refuse my prayer to-night, your boy-lover shall never see your face again. I swear it, and my oath is no less fatal than my hand can be."

She turns aside; there is a smile of triumph on her lips. Has she fooled him so well that he actually believes Keith Athelstone is his rival?

As she stands there, silent and thoughtful, a servant knocks at the door and enters with a telegram.

She hastily seizes it and reads the contents, and all the blood seems to forsake her face. Trembling, she sinks into a chair.

"If all should be lost even now?" she thinks, and her eyes turn in momentary appeal to the stern.

cold face of the Count. "I—I will think of what you have said," she falters. "But, believe me, you are wrong when you think Keith Athelstone is anything to me. He is not; he never will be. As for his life I would not spare it if I could."

"What?" he cries, amazed.

"He—he has insulted me," stammers Lady Jean. "I cannot tell you—I cannot explain; only if you love me you will avenge me—not by his death, that I would not say . . . . I wish you to wound him, and in such a manner that the issue may be fatal—or otherwise—but in any case that it may be uncertain enough to allow of a messenger being sent to England to—a—a friend of his. Do you understand?"

"That I am to be a tool for you? Perfectly, madame. And my reward?"

"You shall ask for it when you have done my bidding," she murmurs softly, and holds out her hand for the clasp of that one whose stains of blood-guiltiness are to receive yet another addition, at her bidding.

He takes hers, and bends down and presses his lips upon it fervently. "I will do your will," he says; "he shall live to suffer. But, madame, remember, I am no fool to be trifled with. If you fail in your part of the bargain it will be at your own peril. Neither man nor woman has ever baulked me of my will, who has not lived to rue it. You may have fooled a score of men, but you shall not fool me! Love like mine may be play to rouse, but it is death when roused."

She looks him calmly in the face. "I have no intention of deceiving you. Promise me that Keith Athelstone shall have but a few days' life left—and——"

Her glance promises the rest. It has all the intoxication, the responsive meaning, that can inflame men's passions—that has ever swayed them to her will. It sways him now.

He draws her to his heart with a fierce and sudden tenderness, and she lets his lips rest unrebuked upon

her own. "I promise," he murmurs; and she knows he means it.

The telegram that has reached Lady Jean has been despatched from Monte Carlo. It contains these lines:

"*Sir Francis Vavasour lies here dangerously ill—it is feared with typhoid fever. He asks constantly for you. Come at once.*"

When Lady Jean is once more alone she reads the message with a contemptuous laugh.

"He must be mad," she says. "I to run the risk of infection—I to turn sick-nurse! I to run the gauntlet of scandal and discussion for—him! Pshaw! if he wants a ministering angel, let him send to Lauraine. It is her *métier*, not mine." Then she goes to her writing-table and takes pen and ink and writes these lines:

"Your husband is dangerously ill. The enclosed telegram will explain. Keith Athelstone was severely wounded in a duel fought in Paris this evening, and he has only a few days to live. If you wish to see him alive come at once. He is at Lady Jean Salomans' house, No. 13, Rue Victoire Paris."

This letter she seals and addresses and despatches immediately. Then, with that same light of triumph in her eyes, that same relentless and unsparing hate in her heart, she goes to her room and to rest.

No ill dreams disturb her—no sleepless hours of weary wakefulness. She has never known remorse in all her life, and in her ears the "still, small voice" of conscience has long ceased to whisper. And as her eyes close in sleep to-night she only thinks: "Vengeance is mine!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

ALONE in the dreary solitude of Falcon's Chase, Lauraine receives that message from her enemy. It is early

morning; the sun is shining, the birds in the forest avenues are singing their gladdest and loudest welcome to spring; she stands at the window of her morning-room and reads those lines penned in the Rue Victoire, and a great darkness seems to come over her.

All her energies seem paralysed; she cannot think, cannot decide. Her husband dangerously ill, alone in a foreign land, deserted by the woman for whom he has wronged his wife, and Keith—Keith dying.

The sunlight seems to blind her; the light of day is cruel. Her heart feels numbed and dead, and in her brain a thousand hammers seem to beat, and through all that numbness and discord one thought alone shapes itself in stern and terrible distinctness. One thought; it is Duty!

He has neglected her, he has outraged her, he has forfeited all honour and respect. Yet none the less is he her husband, none the less is he the father of her child.

Her child! who lay in her bosom, and smiled into her eyes and made earth Paradise for just a little space!

But Keith? Keith, whom she loves; Keith, whom she has wronged; Keith dying, and she cannot be near him, cannot meet once more the look of the "bad blue eyes," cannot whisper peace or comfort to the young and passion-wrecked soul!

Her heart feels breaking. The awfulness of this decision seems beyond her strength to make; and yet she knows—she cannot but know—which is the right course, because of its very hardness.

"I have sinned; I must suffer," she groans despairingly, and then moves away with half-blind eyes, and feels as if her heart must break at last. How can she live on and endure such misery?

In an hour her preparations are complete, and she starts for London. A thought strikes her on her way. At the first available station she gets out and sends a telegram to Lady Etwynde, bidding her meet her at the London terminus. At the terminus her friend is wait-

ing and Colonel Carlisle also. In a few hurried, broken words Lauraine tells them all.

"And you are actually going to *him!*" cried Lady Etwynde, amazed.

"I must; it is what I ought to do," falters Lauraine piteously. "I cannot leave him to die there alone uncared for. After all, he is my husband."

"You are right!" exclaims Lady Etwynde hurriedly. "But a thought strikes me. I—will go to Paris and see Keith Athelstone. You will let me, will you not, Cyril? Perhaps, after all, that fiend is lying."

Lauraine looks at her with unspeakable gratitude.

"Oh, if you would—if only you would!" she cries passionately.

"Certainly we will!" exclaims Colonel Carlisle. "Etwynde is quite right. And I do not see why we shouldn't all go as far as Paris together. We have two hours to spare. Time enough to get what we want—money and wraps. All the rest we can get in Paris."

So it is hurriedly arranged, and the night express sees them all *en route* for the French capital, the Colonel and his wife doing their best to console and cheer Lauraine, whose utter prostration and despair alarm them.

At Paris, Colonel Carlisle decides that she is really in no fit condition to travel alone; and having seen his wife fairly started for the address Lady Jean has given, he takes charge of Lauraine, and goes on with her to the Riviera. When the long, fatiguing journey is over, and they reach Monte Carlo, they find Sir Francis even worse than the telegram had led them to imagine. Lauraine will not hear of Colonel Carlisle staying with her any longer. The fever must take its course; there is nothing but careful nursing and watchfulness to be exercised, and so she sends him back to Paris, and takes up her station by the bedside of the man who has wronged and outraged her so often—whose fretful moans even now are all for that other woman.

The *Sœur de Charité* watching beside him looks up

in surprise as the slight young figure and beautiful face bend over the unconscious man.

"It is madame—for whom he has been always asking?" she asks hesitatingly.

Lauraine looks gravely up.

"I am his wife," she says simply.

Day after day passes wearily, slowly by. Then comes a letter from Lady Etwynde.

"It is all true," she writes; "Keith has been shot, and all for some disgraceful scrape in which that woman is mixed up. But he is not at her house; he is in his own, and Lady Jean has gone off with the man. Every one is talking of it. Keith is in the utmost danger; but if skill and care can do anything, I do not despair of him yet. The shot was within a hair's-breadth of piercing his left lung. He knows me, and I whispered to him I was here by your desire. You should have seen the look in the boy's eyes: I feel so sorry for him; he is so young, and he lies there in this awful state, and I know his heart is aching for sight of you. Lauraine, I see that woman's scheme now. She wanted you to make a false step, one that would have ruined you for ever. Had you left your husband's house to come to Keith it would have looked as if you had fled to your lover. Sir Francis would have been justified in doing anything. But how you had the courage, the self-denial, to act as you have done puzzles me. I could not have believed it, though I thought I knew you so well. But, as I have told you before, hard as duty is, it brings its own reward, and God will surely bless you with peace at last."

Lauraine reads the letter with streaming eyes, sitting there beside her husband's couch. Her heart is wrung with agony, her eyes are full of anguish unutterable.

"Duty," she sighs. "Ah, what a poor cold thing duty looks," and she falls on her knees and prays for the young life she loves, and for that other life trembling now in the balance. As she rises from her knees her husband

turns wearily on his pillow. His eyes unclose, and with a faint gleam of consciousness look at her.

"Lauraine!" he murmurs.

She leans over him, and touches his fevered hands. "Yes; it is I," she says.

"You—and here; where—where——"

He can say no more. She stays him with a hasty gesture. "You must not talk, it is forbidden. It is enough that I heard you were ill—that I came."

"And she—Jean?"

A flush comes to Lauraine's pale cheeks; her eyes grow dark and indignant. "She! Did you actually suppose she would risk her convenience or comfort for the sake of any human being? She has found other consolation." He tries to spring up, but weakness overpowers him. "The curse of hell be upon her—fiend, she-devil, temptress!" and then once again the ravings of delirium crowd his brain, and he knows nothing of her who is beside him.

It is a terrible time for Lauraine. She takes scarcely food or rest. She tends and watches the sick man with untiring patience; all the more stern is she in her task of self-denial because she knows it *is* a task, because she will not spare herself one iota of the pain and weariness that her labours demand. The physicians praise her devotion, and in his lucid moments the sick man murmurs blessings on her, and utters such vows of penitence and remorse as might gladden the heart of any wife whose love and patience had reclaimed her husband from his errors. But they do not gladden Lauraine.

The weary burden presses more heavily; the iron enters more deeply into her soul. But she has resolved to go through with her task, and she dares not count the cost.

"He is better," say the physicians. "He will live."

The news comes to her, and she is silent, then sinks on her knees and hides her face from sight. They think

she is overpowered with emotion, and go softly away and leave her—leave her fighting out a weary battle, sick at heart with shame that in her mind is no gladness, only a duller, sadder despair.

CHAPTER XXXV

No man sees
Beyond the gods and fate.

It is night, and in the sick-room all is hushed and still.

Lauraine, in her soft grey dress is sitting beside the bed. She is alone; the first three hours are her watch.

She thinks her husband is asleep—he lies so still, and his eyes are closed. She looks white and frail as a broken lily. Her head leans on her hands; the whole expression of her face is one so sad, so heart-crushed, that it might have made any one who loved her weep to read it.

Suddenly she looks at the quiet figure. His eyes are fixed on her face. He has been watching her.

"Will you ever forgive me, Lauraine?" he says faintly. "I have been such a brute, and you—I always said you were too good a woman. It must have needed an angel's heart to do what you have done."

"It was nothing—nothing," she says hurriedly. "Sick-nursing was always my *forte*, you know. Besides, I only did my duty."

"Your duty!" he echoes, with something of the old bitterness. "It is well for you that you have so strong a sense of it. I have forgotten what the word means."

She is silent. There is a long pause. After a while he speaks again.

"I have ruined your life, I know, and now it is too late—too late to make amends. Still, the best amends I could make would be to free you from myself—and that will soon be the case, Lauraine. Hush! Do you suppose I believe what those fools said to-day—that a man cannot tell when his end is near? I shall not

plague you any longer—and you may be happy—yet."

"Don't say that," entreats Lauraine, kneeling beside him, and taking the hand he extends so feebly. "There is every hope now; the worst is over. You are only weak, and that makes you dispirited about yourself."

He shakes his head. "I know; I know. Promise me one thing. You will not leave me; you will stay with me to the end. Last night I had a dream. I thought I was alone—all alone, and it was all black and dark, and you had left me; and look where I would there were fiends grinning at me, and all my past sins seemed a burning fire upon my soul. It was horrible. Bad as I am, and have been, say you won't forsake me till the end, Lauraine; it is some comfort to have a good woman's prayers. I can feel that at last."

"I will not leave you, do not fear," Lauraine assures him earnestly.

"But promise, child," he says restlessly, "promise."

And with a great wonder, but most gentle earnestness, she promises.

Another hour.

She kneels there still. He has fallen into a fitful doze, from which he starts from time to time, to be reassured only by the pressure of her hand—murmur from her lips.

Another hour.

The darkness of the night creeps on, slowly, wearily enough. The prayers her lips have framed are hushed now. He sleeps more calmly, more tranquilly, than he has done yet.

Another hour.

The Sister who relieves her comes softly in. She holds something in her hand, which she gives to Lauraine.

For a second's space, as her eyes rest on the little yellow paper, Lauraine grows faint with a great and unaccountable dread. Then she opens the envelope and reads the message within.

" They say there is no hope. If you can by any means leave Sir Francis, do come here. His one prayer is for a sight of you before he dies."

The paper flutters from her hand. She does not speak or move, only stands there as if frozen to stone.

" I must go, I must go ! " she says in her heart. " Dying ! Oh, my love, my love ! Are you leaving me thus ? Will God not have pity on you ? "

Mechanically, like one in a dream, she moves away ; she scarcely knows whither she is going. Only that one impulse is in her mind—to fly to Keith's side at last ; to bid him farewell on earth as never had she thought to bid it ; to kiss for the last time those eyes that she seemed to see before her even now—tender, triumphant, agonized, beseeching, as had been his words !

As her hand is on the door a faint sound reaches her ears, and pierces through the mists that cloud her brain as though its feeble utterance were a trumpet's blast. It is her husband's voice.

" Lauraine," he sighs, and moves restlessly in his sleep. She stands there like one stunned. " Oh, God ! " she murmurs within herself, " *my promise !* "

Alone in her own room Lauraine sits in a sort of stupor, merciful in its dull pain, since it renders all thought powerless for the time being.

Her husband has need of her. She has promised to stay with him, and she must keep her word. No past sins or errors of his should be the measure of her duty, so she had felt ; and now her word is given, and Keith's dying eyes seem to summon her across the weary distance that separates them, and she dares not go.

It is but a few moments since she has left her husband's side, but the Sister comes to her now to entreat her to return. Sir Francis is asking for her. She rises mechanically, and goes back to the sick-room. The gaunt face, the eager eyes are turned towards the door.

"You promised not to leave me," he whispers, faintly, and Lauraine cannot find it in her heart to tell him that she needs rest, that she is worn and spent with long hours of anxiety and suspense.

"Come here—sit down—so—close to me," he continues brokenly. "Tell her to go. I must speak to you alone." Lauraine turns and makes a sign to the Sister. She leaves the room at once.

Then Sir Francis turns and holds out in his hand the little paper that had held for her a message of eternal woe. "Is—is it true?"

She bows her head. Words will not come.

"You dropped it. I asked the woman to give it me," says her husband. "Lauraine, don't stay here for—for my sake; if it will comfort you or—him—go."

A flush comes over the white, sad face, then fades and dies away. "My place is by you," she answers.

"By me?" he echoes bitterly. "By the wretch whose selfishness and brutality have ruined your life? My God!"

There is a long silence. He takes her hands and looks at her. "Even my death cannot atone now. I thought it might. It is true, is it not? You do—love—him?"

"Yes," she answers simply. "But why speak of that now? The past is over and done with. You told me once I was only strong because I had been untempted. Ah! how little you knew!"

"That he should die," mutters Sir Francis. "Young—brave—hopeful. For me—it is no matter. How is it, Lauraine? Tell me all!"

"He was shot," she says, marvelling how she can speak so calmly—how dull and far away seems everything in and out of her life. "In Paris. Some dispute arose between him and—and a friend of Lady Jean Salomans'. They met in the Bois, and Keith was dangerously wounded. They say now there is—no hope."

Oh, the weariness of the voice, the anguish of the white, sad face.

"*She*," mutters Sir Francis. "Was this her vengeance?" Then he is silent again.

"Lauraine, go to Keith Athelstone; I command you. If there is time—if you see him alive tell him I bade you go—tell him I ask his pardon for the wrong I have done him. Go, child; why do you linger here—every moment is precious. Do you think I am so altogether selfish that I cannot see how you suffer—cannot feel all you have done—for me? Go."

"But you," she says hesitatingly; "you need me; you wished me to stay."

"I am better. I feel stronger," he says, with brave effort. "And the worst is over; you need not fear for me. I have wronged you enough. Let me feel I have tried to do one unselfish action—even at the last."

She looks at his face—at the drawn, sharpened features, the sunken eyes, the hollow cheeks. A sudden fear and reproach smite her.

"I cannot leave you," she says, with a burst of tears. "We have been most unhappy, I know, but you are my husband—my child's father."

"And the man for whom you have no love. Child! do not waste time in folly. At a moment like this we see things as they are—naked, bare, undisguised. Take my message to him, and comfort him with your presence. It is the one thing I can do for you both; and I do it with all my heart. Spare no expense—gold will speed your journey, and I—I shall wait here till I know—he has forgiven."

Still she hesitates. Still she feels as if she were in some way wronging the man to whom duty binds her, for sake of the man she loves. He grows impatient.

"For me the worst is past. I shall do very well now. Are you scrupulous as to that?—know no fear. You have been obedient in all things that caused you suffering. Can you not be it for one thing that you desire? Must I storm—insist?"

"Oh, hush," she says passionately; "it is so hard—if only I knew——"

"You do know. I bid you go, and that without an evil thought—you have but to obey."

Then she leaves him. He listens to the hurried preparations. A strange, feverish strength seems to have come to him. As he has said, it is the one really unselfish action he has ever performed in his life. For though he has bidden her leave him, he is longing for her presence. He knows his own hours are numbered, despite the hopes held out. He knows that to have her with him during the dreadful ordeal through which he has to pass would be the only comfort that life holds. He shudders as he lies there face to face with death, as the cold waters of the great river seem to flow on—on—up to his very feet; and in that awful passage there will be no voice to whisper comfort, no prayers from that low, sweet woman's voice to tell of peace, of hope, of the gates of mercy standing open yet, even to the greatest of sinners. He shudders, and the cold dews of anguish stand upon his brow. But he is strong still, strong enough to hide the truth from her. She comes to bid him farewell, and he looks long and sorrowfully at the fair, sad face. How changed she is, how changed!

"You will kiss me—just once, bad as I am," he whispers, and with the tears standing thick in her eyes she bends down and for the first time in all their married life kisses him of her own free will.

"God bless you," she murmurs fervently.

"Say you forgive," he entreats, laying his hand on hers.

"I have forgiven—long ago," she answers, and with murmured words of hopefulness and trust, they part; part to meet on this side of the grave never, never more.

CHAPTER XXXVI

VERY feebly and faintly the pulse of life is flickering in Keith Athelstone's frame. Very despairingly does Lady Etwynde watch beside him.

It is twelve hours since that last message went. Twelve hours, and in every one of these has that same question been on the dying lips—"Will she come?"

They cannot tell. They can only hope.

At last he falls asleep, and Lady Etwynde sits there, sad and anxious and full of grief for the two lives whose short years have held such bitter suffering—before which now stretches the gulf of an eternal parting.

The sky grows rosy with the dawn, the sunlight steals in through the closed blinds, and plays about the quiet room, and Lady Etwynde softly opens the window, and the cool fresh air steals in, and its breath plays over the pallid young face that lies on the pillows, looking like sculptured marble. Quite suddenly he lifts his languid eyelids and looks eagerly, joyfully up. "She is coming!" he cries. "I know it."

The hours pass on, but that inward conviction remains unshaken. Something—some mysterious prescience for which he cannot account—tells him that his darling will be by his side. He is quite patient now, and quite calm—calm with the fulness of a great content. The day passes on to noon and noon to eventide. He asks no more that question: "Will she come?" He knows it is answered.

The door opens softly and without sound. He is lying with closed eyes—the hired nurse is by his side. Lady Etwynde is not there.

Some one comes in and moves towards the bed, and bends over the quiet figure. How still he is; is it sleep, or——?

The lids, with their long, dark lashes, suddenly open,

and looking back to her own with the old boyish, adoring love that nothing can chill or change, are the "bad blue eyes" of her girlhood's lover.

She sinks on her knees; she is trembling greatly; she finds no words to say, but none are needed.

Pain, weakness, weariness, seem to flee away before the magic of her presence; over the white face comes such radiance and tenderness as never has she seen.

"It *is* you. I knew you would come, Lorry."

"My darling boy!" she half sobs, half sighs, and then a great darkness sweeps over her like a cloud, and she sees his face no more.

The nurse summons Lady Etwynde. She is horrified at this occurrence. It will be so bad for her patient. "The shock is enough to kill him"—so she murmurs as they busy themselves with the unconscious woman.

Keith watches them quietly, not even anxious or disturbed. All his life seems to have become one great calm now.

"Kill me——" he says, as the nurse's words reach him. "She has given me life!"

And indeed it seems as if she had, for from that hour slowly but surely he begins to mend.

The weakness and exhaustion against which his physicians had battled, no longer hold his strength in their control. Hope, peace, joy have come to him with Lauraine's presence, and with them comes also the desire to live.

"It is wonderful!" say the doctors.

"It is wonderful!" echoes Lady Etwynde, standing by Lauraine's side some two days later, and noting the change that at last leaves room for hope.

The blue eyes look up to one face—the face that has haunted his life, and seems to have called him back across the border-land on which his feet have rested.

"It is not wonderful," they seem to say, "it is only—love."

CHAPTER XXXVII

"DEAR, dear! Now, only *do* tell!" exclaims Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe, in the solemn conclave of a feminine gathering at the commencement of the London season. "You ought to know, Mrs. Douglas. Is your daughter really going to marry Keith Athelstone after all?"

"After all!" echoes Mrs. Douglas. "All what!"

"Well, I guess you know pretty well what people said two seasons ago. But to think things should turn out like this—quite a romance! Only to think of it!"

"It is not so unnatural," says Mrs. Douglas loftily. "Mr. Athelstone was always deeply attached to my daughter, and, in fact, came home from America with the intention of proposing. But he was just too late. My dear girl had accepted Sir Francis Vavasour."

"Is that so? Well, I've heard another shaped tale about that. Anyhow, it seems Sir Francis was a brute to her, and she—well, any one who knows Lauraine, knows she's got real downright good stuff in her; and as for Vavasour—isn't there one of your national poets says: 'Nothing in his life became him like his leaving it'? That's just about his sort for an epitaph, I should say. No offence, I hope, Mrs. Douglas, though he was your son-in-law. You know I always speak my mind right plump out. There's no nonsense about me."

"I am not in the least offended," says Mrs. Douglas sweetly. "All men have faults, and Sir Francis Vavasour was certainly not as devoted a husband as my dear child had reason to expect. But you see she is rather cold and prudish, and all that, and he—well, he had been spoilt by society. We must excuse him for being a little wild, and really they got on very well together, and nothing could exceed his kindness and generosity to Lauraine. And he has left her everything."

"And she's going to marry Keith Athelstone?"

"Well, her husband has been dead for nearly a year,

and dear Keith is so very delicate since that accident, and he has been ordered to winter at Algiers, and nothing will induce him to go unless Lauraine goes also."

"That was a queer thing too," says Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe eagerly. "Never could make head or tail of it. Lady Jean was kind of mixed up in that duel, wasn't she?"

"Really," says Mrs. Douglas, with her most stately air, "I must decline to say anything about that woman. Her conduct has been quite too disgraceful. Quite."

"Her conduct was no better or worse, that I can see, when her husband was alive," answers Mrs. Woollffe. "She was always bad, though, of course, no one could see it until Joel Salomans had lost all his money. I've never heard a good word of her since."

Mrs. Douglas looks uncomfortable.

"Of course, as long as society is not publicly outraged, as long as there is some show of decency, it puts up with a great deal; but when any one is imprudent enough to over-step the boundary mark, that alters the case."

"Of course," agrees Mrs. Woollffe, with a smile. "It's only natural to wink at what suits our convenience. I wonder why Lady Jean has never come to London again since she married that foreigner, Count——what's his name?"

"Count Karolyski. I don't know, I'm sure, But I think it is just as well. No one in her old set could possibly receive her."

"Well, your English society beats me!" exclaims Mrs. Bradshaw B. Woollffe. "Guess you're the rummest lot of people on the face of creation. What—you're not going?"

"Yes, I must. It is Lady Etwynde Carlisle's day, you know; and I want to look in and hear some later news of my child. She corresponds so constantly with her friend. Of course, it is only natural."

"Old cat," murmurs Mrs. Woollffe, as the satin skirts trail away in the distance. "You could not blackguard your daughter enough once, and now it's 'dear child,'

and 'dear Keith.' Ugh! I've no patience with such humbug. Ah, there is Nan and her husband. Nan, my dear, such news. Keith Athelstone is going to marry, and whom do you think?"

"Lady Vavasour, of course," answers the young Countess of Longleat quietly.

"Why, you knew!" exclaims Mrs. Bradshaw Woollffe, disappointed.

"I didn't; I only guessed. I always thought it would come to that. Poor Keith!"

She sighs, and the radiant eyes grow a little dim. A vision of the handsome face and figure of the man who had been her girlish hero rises suddenly before her; in contrast to them she sees the red hair and burly frame of her own lord and master. "Well, fretting's no good," she says, with a little laugh at the contrast. "I was awfully fond of Keith, and I do hope he'll be happy at last. He's had a long spell of—the other thing."

And meanwhile where is the prime mover in the plot that was to ruin Lauraine's happiness—that was to have been a scheme of vengeance perfect as woman's malice and skill could make it? The world of society, of fashion—the world which she delights in, and has delighted—knows Lady Jean no more.

If she had never met her master in all her life before, she met him in the person of Count Karolyski. He was a stern tyrant and a jealous ruler. Once his wife, and once safe among the gloomy solitudes of his own possessions in the Carpathian range, there was neither peace nor liberty for the Lady Jean.

Passionate, exacting, cruel, domineering, this man, who had for her an absorbing passion, but neither trust nor belief, resolved that she should never escape his keeping, let her chafe and fret as she would.

When she heard of Sir Francis Vavasour's death she had congratulated herself on her prudent acceptance of this other man, more especially as she knew that his

action had rid Lauraine of her lover, and poisoned all the freedom of her sudden release.

But when in course of time she learnt of Keith's recovery, her rage and fury knew no bounds. Then, for the first time as yet in their married life, she gave her husband a specimen of her tigress temper; but then also for the first, though not the last time, did she learn that she had sold herself into a bondage from which there was no escape, and, galled, fretted, half broken-hearted, she found herself compelled to do his bidding, and accept her present fate.

If Lauraine had been unhappy too, it would have sweetened the gall and wormwood of her own lot; but that her rival should now have peace and happiness, and she herself sink to a life that was as dreary as a captive's, was the crowning stab to her many wounds.

And yet, burn in anger, chafe in humiliation as she might, there was no help for her and no possibility of escape. The violence of her tempestuous passions only seemed to amuse him. Tears and reproaches alike beat against the stony calm and immovability of his nature, as futile waves may lash a rock that has borne their fury for centuries.

Do what she might, act as she pleased, one fact alone showed itself to her. She was a disappointed and helpless woman, and she was in the power of a master against whom it was useless to rebel. The long dreary days went by, empty as a rifled grave, cold with the chill of an endless despair.

Such was her life; such would be her life for all the future now. Her soul might rebel as it would, and her heart grow sick within her as the sullen shadows of memory dogged her every footstep, but she was powerless to evade or resent. Her evil deeds had gained now their own reward—the vengeance she had planned for another had recoiled on her own head.

And where are the two about whom so much gossip

is rife, concerning whom so many tongues are wagging ?

Have the sundered lives been joined at last ? Has fate done its worst, and, wearied of spite, grown callous now as to what may or may not ensue ?

Two days after Lauraine had left him, Sir Francis Vavasour died. His presentiment had been true, but his sacrifice had in some way softened the bitterness of death.

Lauraine was smitten with terrible remorse. It seemed to her always as if she should have withstood his wishes and remained by his side until the end.

Even her husband's dying words—the message penned by his hand—failed to comfort her, and it took all Lady Etwynde's persuasions, and all Colonel Carlisle's strong common sense, and all Keith's tender reproaches to lessen the sharpness of her own self-accusation—to convince her that her fault, if fault it were, deserved no such harsh condemnation as she feared.

A year has passed since freedom came to her—a year so peaceful and so calm that sorrow and pain and self-accusing seem lulled to rest, and once again Keith whispers of happiness in store.

A year, and to-morrow she will wed her lover.

He kneels by her side in the summer moonlight—his heart too full of rapture for words—his eyes resting ever on her face with that adoration neither has wearied of yet.

"You are happy—you are *sure* you are happy ?" he asks, as he has asked a thousand times before.

"Ah, yes," she sighs. "Too happy almost, it seems to me."

"And of what were you thinking all this long time ?"

"I was thinking of something Etwynde told me long ago, dear when I was very wicked, very discontented, very wretched."

"What was it ?"

"That anthem from the 'Elijah': 'Trust in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He will give thee thy heart's desire.'"

"And what was—your—heart's desire, my own?"

"Can you ask?" she murmurs passionately; and in the soft summer dusk he draws her arms about his neck, and kisses the trembling lips.

"I can, I do. Tell me," he says, with soft insistence.

"Just your own graceless self, Keith!"

THE END

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