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April 2005 2005 is the 150th anniversary of Mrs. Hungerford's birthday.

Mrs. Hungerford (Margaret Wolfe Hamilton) (1855?-1897)

The Hoyden (1894)

Tauchnitz edition

The Hoyden reviewed in the *Scotsman* :

"A clever, sprightly story... Fresh, sunshiny, and delightful"

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THE HOYDEN

A NOVEL

BY MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

"MOLLY BAWN," "PHYLLIS," "A CONQUERING HEROINE,"

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1894.

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THE HOYDEN.

CHAPTER I.

HOW DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND, AND HOW THE SPARKS FLEW.

The windows are all wide open, and through them the warm, lazy summer wind is stealing languidly. The perfume of the seringas from the shrubbery beyond, mingled with all the lesser but more delicate delights of the garden beneath, comes with the wind, and fills the drawing-room of The Place with a vague, almost drowsy sense of sweetness.

Mrs. Bethune, with a face that smiles always, though now her very soul is in revolt, leans back against the cushions of her lounging chair, her fine red hair making a rich contrast with the pale-blue satin behind it.

"You think he will marry her, then?"

"Think, think!" says Lady Rylton pettishly. "I can't afford to *think* about it. I tell you he *must* marry her. It has come to the very last ebb with us now, and unless Maurice consents to this arrangement ___"

She spreads her beautiful little hands abroad, as if in eloquent description of an end to her sentence.

Mrs. Bethune bursts out laughing. She can always laugh at pleasure.

"It sounds like the old Bible story," says she; "you have an only son, and you must sacrifice him!"

"Don't study to be absurd!" says Lady Rylton, with a click of her fan that always means mischief.

She throws herself back in her chair, and a tiny frown settles upon her brow. She is such a small creation of Nature's that only a frown of the slightest dimensions *could* settle itself comfortably between her eyes. Still, as a frown, it is worth a good deal! It has cowed a good many people in its day, and had, indeed, helped to make her a widow at an early age. Very few people stood up against Lady Rylton's tempers, and those who did never came off quite unscathed.

"Absurd! Have I been absurd?" asks Mrs. Bethune. "My dear Tessie"—she is Lady Rylton's niece, but Lady Rylton objects to being called aunt—"such a sin has seldom been laid to my charge."

"Well, *I* lay it," says Lady Rylton with some emphasis.

She leans back in her chair, and, once again unfurling the huge black fan she carries, waves it to and fro.

Marian Bethune leans back in her chair too, and regards her aunt with a gaze that never wavers. The two poses are in their way perfect, but it must be confessed that the palm goes to the younger woman.

It might well have been otherwise, as Lady Rylton is still, even at forty-six, a very graceful woman. Small—very small—a sort of pocket Venus as it were, but so carefully preserved that at forty-six she might easily be called thirty-five. If it were not for her one child, the present Sir Maurice Rylton, this fallacy might have been carried through. But, unfortunately, Sir Maurice is now twenty-eight by the church register. Lady Rylton hates church registers; they tell so much; and truth is always so rude!

She is very fair. Her blue eyes have still retained their azure tint—a strange thing at her age. Her little hands and feet are as tiny now as when years ago they called all London town to look at them on her presentation to her Majesty. She has indeed a charming face, a slight figure, and a temper that would shame the devil.

It isn't a quick temper—one can forgive that. It is a temper that remembers—remembers always, and that in a mild, ladylike sort of way destroys the one it fastens upon. Yet she is a dainty creature; fragile, fair, and pretty, even now. It is generally in these dainty, pretty, soulless creatures that the bitterest venom of all is to be found.

Her companion is different. Marian Bethune is a tall woman, with a face not perhaps strictly handsome, but yet full of a beautiful *diablerie* that raises it above mere comeliness. Her hair is red—a rich red—magnificent red hair that coils itself round her shapely head, and adds another lustre to the

exquisite purity of her skin. Her eyes have a good deal of red in them, too, mixed with a warm brown—wonderful eyes that hold you when they catch you, and are difficult to forget. Some women are born with strange charms; Marian Bethune is one of them. To go through the world with such charms is a risk, for it must mean ruin or salvation, joy or desolation to many. Most of all is it a risk to the possessor of those charms.

There have been some who have denied the right of Marian to the title beautiful. But for the most part they have been women, and with regard to those others—the male minority—well, Mrs. Bethune could sometimes prove unkind, and there are men who do not readily forgive. Her mouth is curious, large and full, but not easily to be understood. Her eyes may speak, but her mouth is a sphinx. Yet it is a lovely mouth, and the little teeth behind it shine like pearls. For the rest, she is a widow. She married very badly; went abroad with her husband; buried him in Montreal; and came home again. Her purse is as slender as her figure, and not half so well worth possessing. She says she is twenty-eight, and to her praise be it acknowledged that she speaks the truth. Even *good* women sometimes stammer over this question!

"My sin, my sin?" demands she now gaily, smiling at Lady Rylton.

She flings up her lovely arms, and fastens them behind her head. Her smile is full of mockery.

"Of course, my dear Marian, you cannot suppose that I have been blind to the fact that you and Maurice have—for the past year—been—er——"

"Philandering?" suggests Mrs. Bethune lightly.

She leans a little forward, her soft curved chin coming in recognition.

"I beg, Marian, you won't be vulgar," says Lady Rylton, fanning herself petulantly. "It's worse than being immoral."

"Far, *far* worse!" Mrs. Bethune leans back in her chair, and laughs aloud. "Well, I'm not immoral," says she.

Her laughter rings through the room. The hot sun behind her is lighting the splendid masses of her red hair, and the disdainful gleam that dwells in her handsome eyes.

"Of course not," says Lady Rylton, a little stiffly; "even to *mention* such a thing seems to be—er—a little——"

"*Only* a little?" says Mrs. Bethune, arching her brows. "Oh, Tessie!" She pauses, and then with an eloquent gesture goes on again. "After all, why shouldn't I be immoral?" says she. Once again she flings her arms above her head so that her fingers grow clasped behind it. "It pays! It certainly pays. It is only the goody-goodyes who go to the wall."

"My *dear* Marian!" says Lady Rylton, with a delicate pretence at horror; she puts up her hands, but after a second or so bursts out laughing. "I always say you are the one creature who amuses me," cries she, leaning back, and giving full play to her mirth. "I never get *at* you, somehow. I am never *quite* sure whether you are very good or very—well, very much the other thing. That is your charm."

The stupid, pretty little woman has reached a truth in spite of herself—that *is* Mrs. Bethune's charm.

A quick change passes over the latter's face. There is extreme hatred in it. It is gone, however, as soon as born, and remains for ever a secret to her companion.

"Does that amuse you?" says she airily. "I dare say a perpetual riddle *is* interesting. One can never guess it."

"As for that, I can read you easily enough," says Lady Rylton, with a superior air. "You are original, but—yes—I can read you." She could as easily have read a page of Sanscrit. "It is your originality I like. I have never, in spite of many things, been in the least sorry that I gave you a home on the death of your—er—rather disreputable husband."

Mrs. Bethune looks sweetly at her.

"And *such* a home!" says she.

"Not a word, not a word," entreats Lady Rylton graciously. "But to return to Maurice. I shall expect you to help me in this matter, Marian."

"Naturally."

"I have quite understood your relations with Maurice during the past year. One, as a matter of course," with a shrug of her dainty shoulders, "lets the nearest man make love to one—— But Maurice must marry for money, and so must you."

"You are all wisdom," says Marian, showing her lovely teeth. "And this girl? She has been here a week now, but as yet you have told me nothing about her."

"I picked her up!" says Lady Rylton. She lays down her fan—looks round her in a little mysterious fashion, as though to make doubly sure of the apparent fact that there is no one in the room but her niece and herself. "It was the most providential thing," she says; "I was staying at the Warburtons' last month, and one day when driving their abominable ponies along the road, suddenly the little beasts took fright and bolted. You know the Warburtons, don't you? They haven't an ounce of manners between them—themselves, or their ponies, or anything else belonging to them. Well! They tore along as if possessed——"

"The Warburtons?"

"No, the ponies; don't be silly?"

"*Such* a relief!"

"And I really think they would have taken me over a precipice. You can see"—holding out her exquisite little hands—"how inadequate these would be to deal with the Warburton ponies. But for the timely help of an elderly gentleman and a young girl—she looked a mere child——"

"This Miss Bolton?"

"Yes. The old gentleman caught the ponies' heads—so did the girl. You know my slender wrists—they were almost powerless from the strain, but that *girl!* her wrists seemed made of iron. She held and held, until the little wretches gave way and returned to a sense of decency."

"Perhaps they *are* made of iron. Her people are in trade, you say? It is iron, or buttons, or what?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, but at all events she is an heiress to quite a tremendous extent. Two hundred thousand pounds, the Warburtons told me afterwards; even allowing for exaggeration, still, she must be worth a good deal, and poor dear Maurice, what is *he* worth?"

"Is it another riddle?" asks Mrs. Bethune.

"No, no, indeed! The answer is plain to all the world. The Warburtons didn't know these people, these Boltons (so silly of them, with a third son still unmarried), but when I heard of her money I made inquiries. It appeared that she lived with her uncle. Her father had died early, when she was quite young. Her mother was dead too; this last was a *great* comfort. And the uncle had kept her in seclusion all her life. They are nobodies, dear Marian! Nobodies at all, but that girl has two hundred thousand pounds, and can redeem the property of all its mortgages—if only Maurice will let her do it."

"But how did you ask her here?"

"How? What is simpler? The moment the Warburtons told me of the wealth that would be that girl's on her marriage (I was careful to make sure of the marriage point), I felt that an overpowering sense of gratitude compelled me to go and call on her. She and her uncle were new-comers in that county, and—it is very exclusive—so that when I *did* arrive, I was received with open arms. I was charming to the old uncle, a frosty sort of person, but not objectionable in any way, and I at once asked the niece to pay me a visit. They were flattered, the uncle especially so; I expect he had been wanting to get into Society—and as for the girl, she seemed overcome with delight! A very second-class little creature I thought her. No style! No suppression of her real feelings! She said at once how glad she would be to come to me; she gave me the impression that she would be glad to get away from her uncle! No idea of *hiding* anything! So strange!"

"Strange enough to be almost a fresh fashion. Fancy her saying she would be glad to come to *you!* No wonder you were startled!"

"Well, she's here," says Lady Rylton, furling her fan. Mrs. Bethune's little sarcasm has been lost upon her. "And now, how to *use* her? Maurice, though I have thrust the idea upon him, seems averse to it."

"The idea?"

"Of marrying her, of course, and so redeeming himself. She is not what I would have chosen for him, I

admit that; but all things must give way before the ruin that threatens us."

"Yes; true—all things," says Mrs. Bethune in a low tone.

"You see that. But how to bring Maurice to the point? He is so very difficult. *You*, Marian—you have influence with him——"

"I?"

Mrs. Bethune rises in the slow, beautiful fashion that is hers always; she moves towards the window. There is no hurry, no undue haste, to betray the disquietude of her soul.

"You—you, of course," says Lady Rylton peevishly. "I always rely upon you."

"I have no influence!"

"You mean, of course, that you will not use it," says Lady Rylton angrily. "You still think that you will marry him yourself, that perhaps his uncle will die and leave him once more a rich man—the master of The Place, as the old Place's master should be; but that is a distant prospect, Marian."

Mrs. Bethune has swung around, her beautiful figure is drawn up to its most stately height.

"Not another word!" says she imperiously. "What have I to do with your son? Let him marry—let him marry——" She pauses as if choking, but goes on again: "I tell you I have no influence—*none!* Appeal to Margaret, she may help you!"

"She—no!"

"Hush! here she is. Yes; ask her," says Mrs. Bethune, as if desirous of letting Lady Rylton hear the opinion of the new-comer on this extraordinary subject.

CHAPTER II.

HOW MARGARET PLEADS FOR THE LITTLE HOYDEN, AND WITH WHAT ILL-SUCCESS.

Margaret Knollys, entering the room and seeing the signs of agitation in the two faces before her, stops on the threshold.

"I am disturbing you. I can come again," says she, in her clear, calm voice.

"No," says Mrs. Bethune abruptly.

She makes a gesture as if to keep her.

"Not at all. Not at all, dear Margaret. Pray stay, and give me a little help," says Lady Rylton plaintively.

She pulls forward a little chair near her, as if to show Margaret that she must say, and Miss Knollys comes quickly to her. Marian Bethune is Lady Rylton's real niece. Margaret is her niece by marriage.

A niece to be proud of, in spite of the fact that she is thirty years of age and still unmarried. Her features, taken separately, would debar her for ever from being called either pretty or beautiful; yet there have been many in her life-time who admired her, and three, at all events, who would have gladly given their all to call her theirs. Of these one is dead, and one is married, and one—still hopes.

There had been a fourth. Margaret loved him! Yet he was the only one whom Margaret should not have loved. He was unworthy in all points. Yet, when he went abroad, breaking cruelly and indifferently all ties with her (they had been engaged), Margaret still clung to him, and ever since has refused all comers for his sake. Her face is long and utterly devoid of colour; her nose is too large; her mouth a trifle too firm for beauty; her eyes, dark and earnest, have, however, a singular fascination of their own, and when she smiles one feels that one *must* love her. She is a very tall woman, and slight, and gracious in her ways. She is, too, a great heiress, and a woman of business, having been left to manage a huge property at the age of twenty-two. Her management up to this has been faultless.

"Now, how can I help you?" asks she, looking at Lady Rylton. "What is distressing you?"

"Oh! you know," says Mrs. Bethune, breaking impatiently into the conversation. "About Maurice and

this girl! This new girl! There," contemptuously, "have been so many of them!"

"You mean Miss Bolton," says Margaret, in her quiet way. "Do you seriously mean," addressing Lady Rylton, "that you desire this marriage?"

"*Desire* it? No. It is a necessity!" says Lady Rylton. "Who could desire a daughter-in-law of no lineage, and with the most objectionable tastes? But she has money! That throws a cloak over all defects."

"I don't think that poor child has so many defects as you fancy," says Miss Knollys. "But for all that I should not regard her as a suitable wife for Maurice."

Mrs. Bethune leans back in her chair and laughs.

"A suitable wife for Maurice!" repeats she. "Where is *she* to be found?"

"Here! In this girl!" declares Lady Rylton solemnly. "Margaret, you know how we are situated. You know how low we have fallen—you can understand that in this marriage lies our last hope. If Maurice can be induced to marry Miss Bolton——"

A sound of merry laughter interrupts her here. There comes the sound of steps upon the terrace—running steps. Instinctively the three women within the room grow silent and draw back a little. Barely in time; a tiny, vivacious figure springs into view, followed by a young man of rather stout proportions.

"No, no, no!" cries the little figure, "you couldn't beat me. I bet you anything you like you couldn't. You may play me again if you will, and then," smiling and shaking her head at him, "we shall see!"

The windows are open and every word can be heard.

"Your future daughter-in-law," says Mrs. Bethune, in a low voice, nodding her beautiful head at Lady Rylton.

"Oh, it is detestable! A hoyden—a mere *hoyden*," says Lady Rylton pettishly. "Look at her hair!"

And, indeed, it must be confessed that the hoyden's hair is not all it ought to be. It is in effect "all over the place"—it is straight here, and wandering there; but perhaps its wildness helps to make more charming the naughty childish little face that peeps out of it.

"She has no manners—*none!*" says Lady Rylton. "She——"

"Ah, is that you, Lady Rylton?" cries the small creature on the terrace, having caught a glimpse of her hostess through the window.

"Yes, come in—come in!" cries Lady Rylton, changing her tone at once, and smiling and beckoning to the girl with long fingers. "I hope you have not been fatiguing yourself on the tennis-courts, you dearest child!"

Her tones are cooing.

"I have won, at all events!" says Tita, jumping in over the window-sill. "Though Mr. Gower," glancing back at her companion, "won't acknowledge it."

"Why should I acknowledge it?" says the stout young man. "It's folly to acknowledge anything."

"But the truth is the truth!" says the girl, facing him.

"Oh, no; on the contrary, it's generally a lie," says he.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," says Miss Bolton, turning her back on him, which proceeding seems to fill the stout young man's soul with delight.

"Do come and sit down, dear child; you look exhausted," says Lady Rylton, still cooing.

"I'm not," says Tita, shaking her head. "Tennis is not so very exhausting—is it, Mrs. Bethune?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. It seems to have exhausted your hair, at all events," says Mrs. Bethune, with her quick smile. "I think you had better go upstairs and settle it; it is very untidy."

"Is it? Is it?" says Tita.

She runs her little fingers through her pretty short locks, and gazes round. Her eyes meet

Margaret's.

"No, no," says the latter, laughing. "It looks like the hair of a little girl. You," smiling, "*are* a little girl. Go away and finish your fight with Mr. Gower."

"Yes. Come! Miss Knollys is on my side. She knows I shall win," says the stout young man; and, whilst disputing with him at every step, Tita disappears.

"What a girl! No style, no manners," says Lady Rylton; "and yet I must receive her as a daughter. Fancy living with that girl! A silly child, with her hair always untidy, and a laugh that one can hear a mile off. Yet it must be done."

"After all, it is Maurice who will have to live with her," says Mrs. Bethune.

"Oh, I hope not," says Margaret quickly.

"Why?" asks Lady Rylton, turning to her with sharp inquiry.

"It would never do," says Margaret with decision. "They are not suited to each other. Maurice! and that *baby*! It is absurd! I should certainly not counsel Maurice to take such a step as that!"

"Why not? Good heavens, Margaret, I hope you are not in love with him, too!" says Lady Rylton.

"Too?"

Margaret looks blank.

"She means me," says Mrs. Bethune, with a slight, insolent smile. "You know, don't you, how desperately in love with Maurice I am?"

"I know nothing," says Miss Knollys, a little curtly.

"Ah, you will!" says Mrs. Bethune, with her queer smile.

"The fact is, Margaret," says Lady Rylton, with some agitation, "that if Maurice doesn't marry this girl, there—there will be an end of us all. He *must* marry her."

"But he doesn't love—he barely knows her—and a marriage without love——"

"Is the safest thing known."

"Under given circumstances! I grant you that if two people well on in life, old enough to know their own minds, and what they are doing, were to marry, it might be different. They might risk a few years of mere friendship together, and be glad of the venture later on. But for two *young* people to set out on life's journey with nothing to steer by—that would be madness!"

"Ah! yes. Margaret speaks like a book," says Mrs. Bethune, with an amused air; "Maurice, you see, is *so* young, *so* inexperienced——"

"At all events, Tita is only a child."

"Tita! Is that her name?"

"A pet name, I fancy. Short for Titania; she is such a little thing."

"Titania—Queen of the Fairies; I wonder if the original Titania's father dealt in buttons! Is it buttons, or soap, or tar? You didn't say," says Mrs. Bethune, turning to Lady Rylton.

"I really don't know—and as it *has* to be trade, I can't see that it matters," says Lady Rylton, frowning.

"Nothing matters, if you come to think of it," says Mrs. Bethune. "Go on, Margaret—you were in the middle of a sermon; I dare say we shall endure to the end."

"I was saying that Miss Bolton is only a child."

"She is seventeen. She told us about it last night at dinner. Gave us month and day. It was very clever of her. We *ought* to give her birthday-gifts, don't you think? And yet you call her a child!"

"At seventeen, what else?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Margaret," says Lady Rylton pettishly; "and, above all things, don't be old-

fashioned. There is no such product nowadays as a child of seventeen. There isn't *time* for it. It has gone out! The idea is entirely exploded. Perhaps there were children aged seventeen long ago—one reads of them, I admit, but it is too long ago for one to remember. Why, I was only eighteen when I married your uncle."

"Pour uncle!" says Mrs. Bethune; her tone is full of feeling.

Lady Rylton accepts the feeling as grief for the uncle's death; but Margaret, casting a swift glance at Mrs. Bethune, wonders if it was meant for grief for the uncle's life—*with* Lady Rylton.

"He was the ugliest man I ever saw, without exception," says Lady Rylton placidly; "and I was never for a moment blind to the fact, but he was well off at that time, and, of course, I married him. I wasn't in love with him." She pauses, and makes a little apologetic gesture with her fan and shoulders. "Horrid expression, isn't it?" says she. "In love! So terribly *bourgeois*. It ought to be done away with. However, to go on, you see how admirably my marriage turned out. Not a hitch anywhere. Your poor dear uncle and I never had a quarrel. I had only to express a wish, and it was gratified."

"Poor dear uncle was so clever," says Mrs. Bethune, with lowered lids.

Again Margaret looks at her, but is hardly sure whether sarcasm is really meant.

"Clever? Hardly, perhaps," says Lady Rylton meditatively. "Clever is scarcely the word."

"No, wise—wise is the word," says Mrs. Bethune.

Her eyes are still downcast. It seems to Margaret that she is inwardly convulsed with laughter.

"Well, wise or not, we lived in harmony," says Lady Rylton with a sigh and a prolonged sniff at her scent-bottle. "With us it was peace to the end."

"Certainly; it was peace *at* the end," says Mrs. Bethune solemnly.

It was, indeed, a notorious thing that the late Sir Maurice had lived in hourly fear of his wife, and had never dared to contradict her on any subject, though he was a man of many inches, and she one of the smallest creatures on record.

"True! true! *You* knew him so well!" says Lady Rylton, hiding her eyes behind the web of a handkerchief she is holding. One tear would have reduced it to pulp. "And when he was——" She pauses.

"Was dead?" says Margaret kindly, softly.

"Oh, *don't*, dear Margaret, *don't!*" says Lady Rylton, with a tragical start. "That dreadful word! One should never mention death! It is so rude! He, your poor uncle—he *left* us with the sweetest resignation on the 18th of February, 1887."

"I never *saw* such resignation," says Mrs. Bethune, with deep emphasis.

She casts a glance at Margaret, who, however, refuses to have anything to do with it. But, for all that, Mrs. Bethune is clearly enjoying herself. She can never, indeed, refrain from sarcasm, even when her audience is unsympathetic.

"Yes, yes; he was resigned," says Lady Rylton, pressing her handkerchief to her nose.

"So much so, that one might almost think he was *glad* to go," says Mrs. Bethune, nodding her head with beautiful sympathy.

She is now shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Yes; glad. It is such a comfort to dwell on it," says Lady Rylton, still dabbing her eyes. "He was happy—quite happy when he left me."

"I never saw anyone so happy," says Mrs. Bethune.

Her voice sounds choking; no doubt it is emotion. She rises and goes to the window. The emotion seems to have got into her shoulders.

"All which proves," goes on Lady Rylton, turning to Margaret, "that a marriage based on friendship, even between two young people, is often successful."

"But surely in your case there was love on one side," says Miss

Knollys, a little impatiently. "My uncle——"

"Oh, he *adored* me!" cries she ecstatically, throwing up her pretty hands, her vanity so far overcoming her argument that she grows inconsistent. "You know," with a little simper, "I was a belle in my day."

"I have heard it," says Margaret hastily, who, indeed, has heard it *ad nauseam*. "But with regard to this marriage, Tessie, I don't believe you will get Maurice to even think of it."

"If I don't, then he is ruined!" Lady Rylton gets up from her chair, and takes a step or two towards Margaret. "This house-party that I have arranged, with this girl in it, is a last effort," says she in a low voice, but rather hysterically. She clasps her hands together. "He must—he *must* marry her. If he refuses——"

"But she may refuse him," says Margaret gently; "you should think of that."

"She—she refuse? You are mad!" says Lady Rylton. "A girl—a girl called *Bolton*."

"It is certainly an ugly name," says Margaret in a conciliatory way.

"And yet you blame me because I desire to give her Rylton instead, a name as old as England itself. I tell you, Margaret," with a little delicate burst of passion, "that it goes to my very soul to accept this girl as a daughter. She—she is *hateful* to me, not only because of her birth, but in every way. She is antagonistic to me. She—would you believe it?—she has had the audacity to argue with me about little things, as if she—*she*," imperiously, "should have an opinion when I was present."

"My dear Tessie, we all have opinions, and you know you said yourself that at seventeen nowadays one is no longer a child."

"I wish, Margaret, you would cure yourself of that detestable habit of repeating one's self *to* one's self," says Lady Rylton resentfully. "There," sinking back in her chair, and saturating her handkerchief with some delicate essence from a little Louis Quatorze bottle beside her, "it isn't worth so much worry. But to say that she would refuse Maurice——"

"Why should she not? She looks to me like a girl who would not care to risk all her future life for mere position. I mean," says Margaret a little sadly, "that she looks to me as if she would be like that when she is older, and understands."

"Then she must look to you like a fool," says Lady Rylton petulantly.

"Hardly that. Like a girl, rather, with sense, and with a heart."

"My dear girl, we know how romantic you are, we know that old story of yours," says Lady Rylton, who can be singularly nasty at times. "Such an *old* story, too. I think you might try to forget it."

"Does one ever forget?" says Margaret coldly. A swift flush has dyed her pale face. "And story or no story, I shall always think that the woman who marries a man without caring for him is a far greater fool than the woman who marries a man for whom she does care."

"After all, I am not thinking of a woman," says Lady Rylton with a shrug. "I am thinking of Maurice. This girl has money; and, of course, she will accept him if I can only induce him to ask her."

"It is not altogether of course!"

"*I* think it is," says Lady Rylton obstinately.

Miss Knollys shrugs her shoulders.

All at once Mrs. Bethune turns from the window and advances towards Margaret. There is a sudden fury in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" says she, stopping short before Miss Knollys, and speaking with ill-suppressed rage. "Who is *she*, that she should refuse him? That little, contemptible child! That nobody! I tell you, she would not dare refuse him if she asked her! It would be too great an honour for her."

She stops. Her fingers tighten on her gown. Then, as suddenly as it grew, her ungovernable fit of anger seems to die checked, killed by her own will. She sinks into the chair behind her, and looks deliberately at Margaret with an air that, if not altogether smiling, is certainly altogether calm. It must have cost her a good deal to do it.

"It is beyond argument," says she; "he will not ask her."

"He *shall*," says Lady Rylton in a low tone.

Margaret rises, and moves slowly towards one of the open windows; she pauses there a moment, then steps out on to the balcony, and so escapes. These incessant discussions are abhorrent to her, and just now her heart is sad for the poor child who has been brought down here ostensibly for amusement, in reality for business. Of course, Maurice will not marry her—she knows Maurice, he is far above all that sort of thing; but the very attempt at the marriage seems to cover the poor child with insult. And she is such a pretty child.

At this moment the pretty child, with Randal Gower, comes round the corner; she has her skirt caught up at one side, and Miss Knollys can see it is full of broken biscuits. The pulling up of the skirt conduces a good deal to the showing of a lovely little foot and ankle, and Margaret, who has the word "hoyden" still ringing in her ears, and can see Lady Rylton's cold, aristocratic, disdainful face, wishes the girl had had the biscuit in a basket.

"Oh, here is Miss Knollys!" cries Tita, running to her. "We are going to feed the swans" (she looks back at her companion). "He has got some more biscuits in his pockets."

"It's quite true," says Mr. Gower; "I'm nothing but biscuits. Every pocket's full of 'em, and they've gone to dust. I tried to blow my nose a moment ago, but I couldn't. One can't blow one's nose in biscuit."

"Come with us, Miss Knollys—do," says Tita coaxingly.

"I can't. Not now. I can't," says Margaret, who is a little troubled at heart. "Go, dear child, and feed the swans, and take care of her, Randy—take care of her."

"I'll do my best," says Mr. Gower, with much solemnity; "but it's small—very small. As a rule, Miss Bolton takes care of me."

Margaret gives him a last admonitory glance and turns away. In truth, Mr. Gower is but a broken reed to lean upon.

CHAPTER III.

HOW LADY RYLTON SAYS A FEW THINGS THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER LEFT UNSAID. HOW "THE SCHEME" IS LAID BEFORE SIR MAURICE, AND HOW HE REFUSES TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT.

In the meantime the conversation in the drawing-room has been going on.

"Of course, if you think you can persuade him," says Mrs. Bethune presently.

"I know I shall. One can always persuade a man where his interests lie. Besides, I have great weight with him. I tell you I shall manage him. I could always manage his father."

A curious expression crosses Mrs. Bethune's face. The present Baronet may not prove so easy of management as his father!

"Well, I can only wish you success," says she, with a shrug. "By the way, Margaret did not back you up in this scheme as cordially as I deemed possible."

"Margaret is troublesome," says Lady Rylton. "Just when you expect her to sympathize with you, she starts off at a tangent on some other absurd idea. She is full of fads. After all, it would be rash to depend on her. But *you*, Marian—you owe me much."

"How much? My life's blood?"

Mrs. Bethune lets her hands fall clasped upon her knees, and, leaning over them, looks at her aunt—such a wonderfully young aunt, with her yellow hair and her sparkling eyes! Marian's lips have taken a cynical turn; her smile now is unpleasant.

"What a hideous expression!" says Lady Rylton, shuddering. "You spoil yourself, Marian; you do indeed. You will never make a good marriage if you talk like that. 'Life's blood!'—*detestable!*"

"I don't desire a good marriage, as *you* regard it."

Lady Rylton sits suddenly quite upright.

"If you mean marriage with Maurice," says she, "put that out of your head. You must be mad to cherish such a hope. You are both paupers, for one thing, and for the rest, I assure you, my dear, Maurice is not as infatuated about you as you are about him!"

Mrs. Bethune makes a sudden movement; it is slight. Her face darkens. One reading between the lines might at this moment see that she could have killed Lady Rylton with a wondrous joy. Killing has its consequences, however, and she only stands quite quiet, looking at her foe. What a look it is!

"It is you who are mad," says she calmly. "What I meant was that I should probably marry some rich nobody for the sake of his wealth. It would be quite in my line. I should arrange him, form him, bring him into Society, even against Society's will! There is a certain excitement in the adventure. As for Maurice, he is no doubt in your eyes a demigod—in mine," with infinite contempt, "he is a man."

"Well, I hope you will keep to all that," says Lady Rylton, who is shrewd as she is cruel, "and that you will not interfere with this marriage I have arranged for Maurice."

"Why would I interfere?"

"Because you interfere always. You can't bear to see any man love any woman but yourself."

Mrs. Bethune smiles. "A common fault. It belongs to most women. But this girl—you like her?"

"On the contrary, as I have told you, I detest her. Once Maurice has her money safely in his hands, I shall know how to deal with her. A little, ignorant, detestable child! I tell you, Marian, that the time will come when I shall pay her out for her silly insolence towards me."

"She is evidently going to have a good time if Maurice proposes to her."

"He *shall* propose. Why——" She breaks off suddenly. "Not another word," says she, putting up her hand. "Here is Maurice. I shall speak to him now."

"Shall I stay and help you?"

"No, thank you," says Lady Rylton, with a little knowing grimace.

Seeing it, Marian's detestation grows apace. She rises—and calmly, yet swiftly, leaves the room. Sir Maurice is only crossing the lawn now, and by running through the hall outside, and getting on to the veranda outside the dining-room window, she can see him before he enters the drawing-room.

Gaining the veranda, she leans over the railings and makes a signal to him; it is an old signal. Rylton responds to it, and in a second is by her side.

"Oh no, you must not stay; your mother is waiting for you in the south drawing-room. She saw you coming; she wants you."

"Well, but about what?" asks Rylton, naturally bewildered.

"Nothing—only—she is going to advise you for your good. Shall I," smiling at him in her beautiful way, and laying one hand upon his breast—"shall I advise you, too?"

"Yes, yes," says Rylton; he takes the hand lying on his breast and lifts it to his lips. "Advise me."

"Ah, no!" She pauses, a most eloquent pause, filled with a long deep glance from her dark eyes. "*There, go!*" she says, suddenly pushing him from her.

"But your advice?" asks he, holding her.

"Pouf! as if that was worth anything." She looks up at him from under her lowered lids. "Well, take it. My advice to you is to come to the rose-garden as soon as possible, and see the roses before they fade out of all recognition! *I* am going there now. You know how I love that rose-garden; I almost live there nowadays."

"I wish I could live there too," says Rylton, laughing.

He lifts her hand again and presses it fondly to his lips. Something, however, in his air, though it had breathed devotion, troubles Mrs. Bethune; she frowns as he leaves her, and, turning into a side-path the leads to the rose-garden, gives herself up a prey to thought.

Rylton, with a shrug, goes toward the room where Marian had told him his mother was awaiting him. He could very readily (as Lady Rylton had not formally requested his presence) have stayed away, but long experience has driven into him the knowledge that when his mother wants anything, all the delays and subterfuges and evasions in the world will not prevent her having it. To get it over, then, as soon as possible is the chief thing. And, after all, he is so far happy in that he knows what the immediate interview is to be about. That little ridiculous girl—not half a bad little girl—but——

It is with quite a resigned air that he seats himself on the lounge, and agrees with himself to make his mother happy by letting her talk to him uninterruptedly for ten minutes.

"Women like to talk," says Sir Maurice to himself, as he sits on the lounge where Marian had just now sat. He finds consolation in his mother's poodle, who climbs on his knees, giving herself up a willing prey to his teasing.

"Maurice, you are not attending," says Lady Rylton at last, with a touch of serious anger.

"I am indeed—I am, I assure you," says Maurice, looking up. "If I'm not, it's your poodle's fault; she is such a fascinating creature."

As he says this he makes a little attack on the poodle, who snaps back at him, barking vigorously, and evidently enjoying herself immensely.

"I want a decisive answer from you," says his mother.

"A decisive answer! How can I give that?"

He is still laughing, but even as he laughs a sound from without checks him. It is another laugh—happy, young, joyous. Instinctively both he and Lady Rylton look towards the open window. There below, still attended by Mr. Gower, and coming back from her charitable visit to the swans, is Tita, her little head upheld, her bright eyes smiling, her lips parted. There is a sense of picturesque youth about the child that catches Rylton's attention, and holds it for the moment.

"There she is," says he at last, looking back over his shoulder at his mother. "Is *that* the wife you have meted out for me—that baby?"

"Be serious about it, Maurice; it is a serious matter, I assure you."

"Fancy being serious with a baby! She's too young, my dear mother. She couldn't know her duty to her neighbours yet, to say nothing of her duty to her husband."

"You could teach her."

"I doubt it. They have taken that duty off nowadays, haven't they?" He is still looking at Tita through the window; her gay little laugh comes up to him again. "Do you know, she is very pretty," says he dispassionately; "and what a little thing! She always makes me think of a bird, or a mouse, or a——"

"Think of her as a girl," says his mother impatiently.

"Certainly. After all, it would be impossible to think of her as a boy; she's too small."

"I don't know about that," said Lady Rylton, shrugging her shoulders. "She's much more a boy than a girl, where her manners are concerned."

"Poor little hoyden! That's what you call her, isn't it—a hoyden?"

"Did Marian tell you that?"

"Marian? Certainly not!" says Sir Maurice, telling his lie beautifully. "Marian thinks her beneath notion. So would you, if——" He pauses. "If she hadn't a penny you wouldn't know her," he says presently; "and you admit she has no manners, yet you ask me to marry her. Now, if I did marry her, what should I do with her?"

"Educate her! Control her! Says his mother, a little viciously.

"I confess I am not equal to the occasion. I could not manage a baby. The situation doesn't suit me."

"Maurice—it *must!*" Lady Rylton rises, and, standing near him with her hand on the table, looks at

him with a pale face. "You find fault with her; so do I, and frankly admit she is the last woman in the world I should have chosen for you if I could help it, but she is one of the richest girls in England. And after all, though I detest the very sound of it, Trade is now our master. You object to the girl's youth; that, however, is in her favour. You can mould her to your own designs, and"—she casts a bitter glance at him that will not be suppressed—"all women cannot be widows. Then, as for her being so little a creature, she is surely quite as tall as I am, and your father—you know, Maurice, how devoted he was to me."

"Oh yes, poor old Dad!" says Maurice, with a movement that might mean pain. He seldom speaks of his father—*never* to his mother. He had certainly loved his father. He moves quickly to the further end of the room.

"You will think of this girl, Maurice?"

"Oh, if that's all," laughing shortly, "you have arranged for that. One can't help thinking of the thing that is thrust under one's eyes morning, noon, and night. I shall think of her certainly until she goes away." He stops, and then says abruptly, "When is she going?"

"When her engagement to you is an accomplished fact."

"My dear mother, how absurd it all is! Poor little girl, and what a shame too! She doesn't even like me! We shouldn't be taking her name in vain like this. By-the-bye, what queer eyes she has!—have you noticed?"

"She has two hundred thousand pounds," says Lady Rylton solemnly. "That is of far greater consequence. You know how it is with us, Maurice. We can hold on very little longer. If you persist in refusing this last chance, the old home will have to go. We shall be beggars!" She sinks back in her chair, and sobs softly but bitterly.

"Don't go on like that—don't!" says Rylton, coming over to her and patting her shoulder tenderly. "There must be some other way out of it. I know we are in a hole more or less, but——"

"How lightly you speak of it! Who is to pay your debts? You know how your gambling on the turf has ruined us—brought us to the very verge of disgrace and penury, and now, when you can help to set the old name straight again, you refuse—refuse!" She stops as if choking.

"I don't think my gambling debts are the actual cause of our worries," says her son, rather coldly. "If I have wasted a few hundred on a race here and there, it is all I have done. When the property came into my hands it was dipped very deeply."

"You would accuse your father——" begins she hotly.

Rylton pauses. "No; not my father," says he distinctly, if gently.

"You mean, then, that you accuse *me!*" cries she, flashing round at him.

All at once her singularly youthful face grows as old as it ought to be—a vindictive curve round the mouth makes that usually charming feature almost repulsive.

"My dear mother, let us avoid a scene," says her son sternly. "To tell you the truth, I have had too many of them of late."

Something in his manner warns her to go no farther in the late direction. If she is to win the cause so close to her heart, she had better refrain from recrimination—from an accusation of any sort.

"Dearest Maurice," says she, going to him and taking his hand in hers, "you know it is for your sake only I press this dreadful matter. She is so rich, and you—we—are so poor! She has a house in Surrey, and one in the North—delightful places, I have been told—and, of course, she would like you to keep up your own house in town. As for me, all I ask is this old house—bare and uncomfortable as it is."

"Nonsense, mother," letting her hand go and turning away impatiently. "You speak as if it were all settled."

"Why should it *not* be settled?"

"You talk without thinking!" He is frowning now, and his tone is growing angry. "Am I the only one to be consulted?"

"Oh! as for her—that child! Of course you can influence her."

"I don't want to," wearily.

"You can do more than that. You are very good-looking, Maurice. You can——" She hesitates.

"Can what?" coldly.

"Fascinate her."

"I shall certainly not even try to do that. Good heavens! what do you mean?" says her son, colouring a dark red with very shame. "Are you asking me to make love to this girl—to pretend an admiration for her that I do not feel? To—to—*lie* to her?"

"I am only asking you to be sensible," says his mother sullenly. She has gone back to her chair, and now, with lowered lids and compressed lips, is fanning herself angrily.

"I shan't be sensible in that way," says her son, very hotly. "Put it out of your head. To me Miss Bolton (it is really ridiculous to call her Miss anything; she ought to be Betty, or Lizzie, or Lily, or whatever her name is, to everyone at her age)—to me she seems nothing but a baby—and—I *hate* babies!"

"Marian has taught you!" Says his mother, with a sneer. "*She* certainly is not a baby, whatever else she may be. But I tell you this, Maurice, that you will hate far more being left a beggar in the world, without enough money to keep yourself alive."

"I am sure I can keep myself alive."

"Yes, but how? *You*, who have been petted and pampered all your life?"

"Oh, *don't* speak to me as if I were in the cradle!" says Maurice, with a shrug.

"Do you never think?"

"Sometimes".

"Oh yes, of Marian. That designing woman! Do you believe *I* haven't read her, if you are still blind? She will hold you on and on and on. And if your uncle *should* chance to die, why, then she will marry you; but if in the meantime she meets anyone with money who will marry her, why, good-bye to *you*. But you must not marry! Mind that! You must be held in chains whilst she goes free. Really, Maurice," rising and regarding him with extreme contempt, "your folly is so great over this absurd infatuation for Marian, that sometimes I wonder if you can be my own son."

"I am my father's son also," says Maurice. "He, I believe, did sometimes believe in somebody. He believed in you."

He turns away abruptly, and an inward laugh troubles him. Was that last gibe not an argument against himself, his judgment? Like his father; *is* he like his father? Can he, too, see only gold where dross lies deep? Sometimes, of late he has doubted. The laughter dies away, he sighs heavily.

"He was wise," says Lady Rylton coolly. "He had no cause to regret his belief. But you, you sit in a corner, as it were, and see nothing but Marian smiling. You never see Marian frowning. Your corner suits you. It would trouble you too much to come out into the middle of the room and look around Marian. And in the end what will it all come to? *Nothing!*"

"Then why make yourself so unhappy about nothing?"

"Because——"

"My dear mother," turning rather fiercely on her, "let us have an end of this. Marian would not marry me. She has refused me many times."

"I am quite aware of that," says Lady Rylton calmly. "She has taken care to tell me so. She will never marry you unless you get your uncle's money (and he is as likely to live to be a Methuselah as anyone I ever saw; the scandalous way in which he takes care of his health is really a byword!), but she will hold you on until——"

"I asked you not to go on with this," says Rylton, interrupting her again. "If you have nothing better to say to me than the abuse of Marian, I——"

"But I have. What is Marian, what is *anything* to me except your marriage with Tita Bolton? Maurice, think of it. Promise me you will think of it. Maurice, don't go."

She runs to him, lays her hand on his arm, and tries to hold him.

"I must." He lifts her hand from his arm, presses it, and drops it deliberately. "My dear mother, I can't; I can't, really," says he.

She stands quite still. As he reaches the door, he looks back. She is evidently crying. A pang shoots through his heart. But it is all so utterly impossible. To marry that absurd child! It is out of question. Still, her tears trouble him. He can see her crying as he crosses the hall, and then her words begin to trouble him even more. What was it she had said about Marian? It was a hint, a very broad one. It meant that Marian might love him if he were a poor man, but could love him much more if he were a rich one. As a fact, she would marry him if he had money, but not if he were penniless. After all, why not? She, Marian, had often said all that to him, or at least some of it. But that other word, of her marrying some other man should he appear——

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE HEART OF MAURICE GREW HOT WITHIN HIM, AND HOW HE PUT THE QUESTION TO THE TOUCH, AND HOW HE NEITHER LOST NOR WON.

Mrs. Bethune, sauntering slowly between the bushes laden with exquisite blooms, all white and red and yellow, looks up as he approaches her with a charming start.

"You!" she says, smiling, and holding out her hand—a large hand but beautiful. "It is my favourite spot. But that *you* should have come here too!"

"You knew I should come!" returns he gravely. Something in her charming air of surprise jars upon him at this moment. Why should she pretend?—and to him!

"I knew?"

"You told me you were coming here."

"Ah, what a lovely answer!" says she, with a glance from under her long lashes, that—whatever her answer may be—certainly *is* lovely.

Rylton regards her moodily. If she really loved him, would she coquet with him like this—would she so pretend? All in a second, as he stands looking at her, the whole of the past year comes back to him. A strange year, fraught with gladness and deep pain—with fears and joys intense! What had it all meant? If anything, it had meant devotion to her—to his cousin, who, widowed, all but penniless, had been flung by the adverse winds of Fate into his home.

She was the only daughter of Lady Rylton's only brother, and the latter had taken her in, and in a measure adopted her. It was a strange step for her to take—for one so little led by kindly impulses, or rather for one who had so few kindly impulses to be led by; but everyone has a soft spot somewhere in his heart, and Lady Rylton had loved her brother, good-for-nothing as he was. There might have been a touch of remorse, too, in her charity; she had made Marian's marriage!

Grudgingly, coldly, she opened her son's doors to her niece, but still she opened them. She was quite at liberty to do this, as Maurice was seldom at home, and gave her always *carte blanche* to do as she would with all that belonged to him. She made Marian Bethune's life for the first few months a burden to her, and then Marian Bethune, who had waited, took the reins in a measure; at all events, she made herself so useful to Lady Rylton that the latter could hardly get on without her.

Maurice had fallen in love with her almost at once; insensibly but thoroughly. There had been an hour in which he had flung himself, metaphorically, at her feet (one never does the real thing now, because it spoils one's trousers so), and offered his heart, and all the fortune still left to him after his mother's reign; and Marian had refused it all, very tenderly, very sympathetically, very regretfully—to tell the truth—but she *had* refused it.

She had sweetened the refusal by declaring that, as she could not marry him—as she could not to be so selfish as to ruin his prospects—she would never marry at all. She had looked lovely in the light of the dying sunset as she said all this to him, and Maurice had believed in her a thousand times more than before, and had loved her a thousand times deeper. And in a sense his belief was justified. She did love him, as she had never loved before, but not well enough to risk poverty again. She had seen enough of that in her first marriage, and in her degradation and misery had sworn a bitter oath to herself never again to marry, unless marriage should sweep her into the broad river of luxury and content. Had Maurice's financial affairs been all they ought to have been but for his mother's

extravagances, she undoubtedly would have chosen him before all the world; but Maurice's fortunes were (and are) at a low ebb, and she would risk nothing. His uncle *might* die, and then Maurice, who was his heir, would be a rich man; but his uncle was only sixty-five, and he might marry again, and—No, she would refuse!

Rylton had pressed his suit many times, but she had never yielded. It was always the same argument, she would not ruin *him*. But one day—only the other day, indeed—she had said something that made him know she sometimes counted on his uncle's death. She would marry him then! She would not marry a poor man, however much she loved him. The thought that she was waiting for his uncle's death revolted him at the moment, and though he forgave her afterwards, still the thought rankled.

It hurt him, in a sense, that she could *desire* death—the death of another—to create her own content.

His mother had hinted at it only just now! Marian feared, she said—feared to step aboard his sinking ship. Where, then, was her love, that perfect love that casteth out all fear?

A wave of anger rushes over him as he looks at her now—smiling, fair, with large, deep, gleaming eyes. He tells himself he will know at once what it is she means—what is the worth of her love.

She is leaning towards him, a soft red rosebud crushed against her lips.

"Ah, yes! It is true. I *did* know you were coming," says she tenderly.

She gives a hasty, an almost imperceptible glance around. Lady Rylton is often a little—just a *little*—prone to prying—especially of late; ever since the arrival of that small impossible heiress, for example; and then very softly she slips her hand into his.

"What an evening!" says she with delicate fervour. "How sweet, how perfect, Maurice!"

"Well?" in a rather cold, uncompromising way.

Mrs. Bethune gives him a quick glance.

"What a tone!" says she; "you frighten me!"

She laughs softly, sweetly. She draws closer to him—closer still;—and, laying her cheek against his arm, rubs it lightly, caressingly, up and down.

"Look here!" says he quickly, catching her by both arms, and holding her a little away from him; "I have a question to ask you."

"There is always a question," says she, smiling still, "between friends and foes, then why not between—*lovers?*"

She lingers over the word, and, stooping her graceful head, runs her lips lightly across the hand that is holding her right arm.

A shiver runs through Rylton. Is she true or false? But, however it goes, how exquisite she is!

"And now your question," says she; "how slow you are to ask it. Now *what* is it?—what—what?"

"Shall I ask it, Marian? I have asked it too often before."

He is holding her arms very tightly now, and his eyes are bent on hers. Once again he is under the spell of her beauty.

"Ask—ask what you will!" cries she. She laughs gaily, and throws back her head. The last rays of the sunlight catch her hair, and lift it to a very glory round her beautiful face. "Go on, go on," she says lightly. There is, perhaps, some defiance in her tone, but, if so, it only strengthens her for the fight. "I am your captive!" She gives a little expressive downward glance at his hands, as he holds her arms. "Speak, my lord! and your slave answers." She has thrown some mockery into her tone.

"I am not your lord," says Rylton. He drops her arms, and lets her go, and stands well back from her. "That is the last part assigned to me."

Mrs. Bethune's gaze grows concentrated. It is fixed on him. What does he mean? What is the object of this flat rebellion—this receding from her authority? Strength is hers, as well as charm, and she comes to the front bravely.

"Now what *is* it?" asks she, creeping up to him again, and now slipping her arm around his neck. "How have I vexed you? Who has been saying nasty little things about me? The dear mother, eh?"

"I want no one to tell me anything, but you."

"Speak, then; did I not tell you I should answer?"

"I want an answer to one question, and one only," says Rylton slowly.

"That is modesty itself."

"Will you marry me?"

"Marry you?" She repeats his words almost in a whisper, her eyes on the ground, then suddenly she uplifts her graceful form, and, lazily clasping her arms behind her head, looks at him. "Surely we have been through this before," says she, with a touch of reproach.

"Many times!" His lips have grown into a rather straight line. "Still I repeat my question."

"Am I so selfish as this in your eyes?" asks she. "Is it thus you regard me?" Her large eyes have grown quite full of tears. "Is my own happiness so much to me that for the sake of it I would deliberately ruin yours?"

"It would not ruin mine! Marry me, Marian, if—you love me!"

"You know I love you." Her voice is tremulous now and her face very pale. "But *how* can we marry? I am a beggar, and you——"

"The same!" returns he shortly. "We are in the same boat."

"Still, one must think."

"And you are the one. Do you know, Marian"—he pauses, and then goes on deliberately—"I have been thinking, too, and I have come to the conclusion that when one truly loves, one never calculates."

"Not even for the one beloved?"

"For no one!"

"Is love, then, only selfishness incarnate?"

"I cannot answer that. It is a great mixture; but, whatever it is, it rules the world, or should rule it. It rules *me*. You tell me—you are for ever telling me—that marriage with you, who are penniless, would be my ruin, and yet I would marry you. Is that selfishness?"

"No; it is only folly," says she in a low, curious tone.

Maurice regards her curiously.

"Marian," says he quickly, impulsively, "there are other places. If you would come abroad with me, I could carve out a fresh life for us—I could work for you, live for you, endure all things for you. Come! come!"

He holds out his hands to her.

"But why—why not wait?" exclaims she with deep agitation. "Your uncle—he *cannot* live for ever."

"I detest dead men's shoes," returns he coldly. Her last words have chilled him to his heart's core. "And besides, my uncle has as good a life as my own."

To this she makes no answer; her eyes are downbent. Rylton's face is growing hard and cold.

"You refuse, then?" says he at last.

"I refuse nothing, but——" She breaks off. "Maurice," cries she passionately, "why do you talk to me like this? What has changed you? Your mother? Ah, I know it! She has set her heart on your marriage with this—this little *nobody*, and she is poisoning your mind against me. But you—*you*—you will not forsake me for her!"

"It is you who are forsaking me," returns he violently. "Am I nothing to you, except as a medium by which you may acquire all the luxuries that women seem ready to sell their very souls for? Come, Marian, rose above it all. I am a poor man, but I am young, and I can work. Marry me as I am, and for what I am in your sight, and seek a new life with me abroad."

"It is madness," says she, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible. For a short, *short* minute the plan held out to her had tempted her, but something stronger than her love prevailed. She could wait—she *would*; and she is so sure of him. He is her own, her special property. Yes! she can afford to wait. Something must occur shortly to change the state of his affairs, and even if things come to the very worst—there are others. "I tell you," says she, "that I will not spoil your life. Your uncle—he would be furious if you married me, and——"

Rylton put her somewhat roughly from him.

"I am tired of that old excuse," says he, his tone even rougher than his gesture. He turns away.

"Maurice!" says she sharply—there is real anguish in her tone, her face has grown white as death—"Maurice, come back." She holds out her arms to him. "Oh—darling, do not let your mother come between us! That girl—she will *make* you marry that girl. She has money, whereas I—what am I? A mere castaway on life's sea! Yes, yes." She covers her face with her hands in a little paroxysm of despair. "Yes," faintly, "you will marry that girl."

"Well, why not?" sullenly. He is as white as she is—his face is stern. "If she will deign to accept me. I have not so far," with a bitter laugh, "been very successful in love affairs."

"Oh! *How* can you say that—and to me?"

She bursts into tears, and in a moment he has her in his arms. His beautiful darling! He soothes her, caresses her, lets her weave the bands of her fascination over him all fresh again.

It is only afterwards he remembers that through all her grief and love she had never so forgotten herself as to promise to exile herself for his sake in a foreign land.

CHAPTER V.

SHOWING HOW, WHEN PEOPLE DO CONGREGATE TOGETHER, MUCH KNOWLEDGE MAY BE FOUND, AND HOW THE LITTLE HOYDEN HAD SOME KIND THINGS SAID ABOUT HER.

"Game and set," cries Tita at the top of her young voice, from the other end the court. It would be useless to pretend she doesn't *shout* it. She is elated—happy. She has won. She tears off the little soft round cap that, defiant of the sun, she wears, and flings it sky-high, catching it deftly as it descends upon the top of her dainty head, a *little* sideways. Her pretty, soft, fluffy hair, cut short, and curled all over her head by Mother Nature, is flying a little wildly across her brows, her large gray eyes (that sometimes are so nearly black) are brilliant. Altogether she is just a little, a *very* little, pronounced in her behaviour. Her opponents, people who have come over to The Place for the day, whisper something to each other, and laugh a little. After all, they have lost—perhaps they are somewhat spiteful. Lady Rylton, sitting on the terrace above, bites her lips. What an impossible girl! and yet how rich! Things must be wrong somewhere, when Fate showers money on such a little ill-bred creature.

"How funny she is!" says Mrs. Chichester, who is sitting near Lady Rylton, a guest at The Place in this house-party, this last big entertainment, that is to make or mar its master. Lady Rylton had organized it, and Sir Maurice, who never contradicted her, and who had not the slightest idea of the real meaning of it, had shrugged his shoulders. After all, let her have her own way to the last. There would be enough to pay the debts and a little over for her; and for him, poverty, a new life, and emancipation. He is tired of his mother's rule. "And how small!" goes on Mrs. Chichester, a tall young woman with light hair and queer eyes, whose husband is abroad with his regiment. "Like a doll. I love dolls; don't you, Captain Marryatt?"

"Are *you* a doll?" asks Captain Marryatt, who is leaning over her.

He is always leaning over her!

"I never know what I am," says Mrs. Chichester frankly, her queer eyes growing a little queerer. "But Miss Bolton, how delightful she is! so natural, and Nature is always so—so——"

"Natural!" supplies Mr. Gower, who is lying on a rug watching the game below.

"Oh, get out!" says Mrs. Chichester, whose manners are not her strong point.

She is sitting on a garden chair behind him, and she gives him a little dig in the back with her foot as she speaks.

"Don't! I'm bad there!" says he.

"I believe you are bad everywhere," says she, with a pout.

"Then you believe wrong! My heart is a heart of gold," says Mr. Gower ecstatically.

"I'd like to see it," says Mrs. Chichester, who is not above a flirtation with a man whom she knows is beyond temptation; and truly Randal Gower is hard to get at!

"Does that mean that you would gladly see me dead?" asks he. "Oh, cruel woman!"

"I'm tired of seeing you as you are, any way," says she, tilting her chin. "Why don't you fall in love with somebody, for goodness' sake?"

"Well, I'm trying," says Mr. Gower, "I'm trying hard; but," looking at her, "I don't seem to get on. You don't encourage me, you know, and I'm very shy!"

"There, don't be stupid," says Mrs. Chichester, seeing that Marryatt is growing a little enraged. "We were talking of Miss Bolton. We were saying——"

"That she was Nature's child."

"Give me Nature!" says Captain Marryatt, breaking into the *tête-à-tête* a little sulkily. "Nothing like it."

"Is that a proposal?" demands Mr. Gower, raising himself on his elbow, and addressing him with deep interest. "It cannot be *Mrs.* Bolton you refer to, as she is unfortunately dead. Nature's child, however, is still among us. Shall I convey your offer to her?"

"Yes, shall he?" asks Mrs. Chichester.

She casts a teasing glance at her admirer; a little amused light has come into her green-gray eyes.

"I should think *you*, Randal, would be the fitting person to propose to her, considering how you haunt her footsteps day and night," says a strange voice.

It comes from a tall, gaunt old lady, who, with ringlets flying, advances towards the group. She is a cousin of the late Sir Maurice, and an aunt of Gower's, from whom much is to be expected by the latter at her death. There is therefore, as you see, a cousinship between the Gowers and the Ryltons.

"My dear aunt, is that you?" says Mr. Gower with enthusiasm. "Come and sit here; *do*, just here *beside me!*"

He pats the rug on which he is reclining as he speaks, beckoning her warmly to it, knowing as he well does that her bones would break if she tried to bring them to so low a level.

"Thank you, Randal, I prefer a more elevated position," replies she austerely.

"Ah, you would! you would!" says Randal, who really ought to be ashamed of himself. "You were meant for high places."

He sighs loudly, and goes back on his rug.

"Miss Gower is right," says Mrs. Bethune gaily, who has just arrived. "Why don't *you* go in for Miss Bolton?"

"She wouldn't have me!" says Gower tragically. "I've hinted all sorts of lovely things to her during the past week, but she has been apparently blind to the brilliant prospects opened to her. It has been my unhappy lot to learn that she prefers lollipops to lovers."

"You tried her?" asks Mrs. Chichester.

"Well, I believe I *did* do a good deal in the chocolate-cream business," says Mr. Gower mildly.

"And she preferred the creams?"

"Oh! much, *much!*" says Gower.

"So artless of her," says Mrs. Bethune, with a shrug. "I do love the nineteenth-century child!"

"If you mean Miss Bolton, so do I," says a young man who has been listening to them, and laughing

here and there—a man from the Cavalry Barracks at Ashbridge. "She's quite out-of-the-way charming."

Mrs. Bethune looks at him—he is only a boy and easily to be subdued, and she is glad of the opportunity of giving some little play to the jealous anger that is raging within her.

"She has a hundred thousand charming ways," says she, smiling, but very unpleasantly. "An heiress is always charming."

"Oh no! I didn't look at it in that way at all," says the boy, reddening furiously. "One wouldn't, you know—when looking at *her*."

"Wouldn't one?" says Mrs. Bethune. She is smiling at him always; but it is a fixed smile now, and even more bitter. "And yet one might," says she.

She speaks almost without knowing it. She is thinking of Rylton—might *he*?

"I think not," says the boy, stammering.

It is his first lesson in the book that tells one that to praise a woman to a woman is to bring one to confusion. It is the worst manners possible.

"I agree with you, Woodleigh," says Gower, who is case-hardened and doesn't care about his manners, and who rather dislikes Mrs. Bethune. "She's got lovely little ways. Have *you* noticed them?"

He looks direct at Marian.

"No," says she, shaking her head, but very sweetly. "But, then, I'm so dull."

"Well, she has," says Gower, in quite a universally conversational tone, looking round him. He turns himself on his rug, pulls a cushion towards him, and lies down again. "And they're all her own, too."

"What a comfort!" says Mrs. Bethune, rather nastily.

Gower looks at her.

"Yes, you're right," says he. "To be original—honestly original—is the thing nowadays. Have you noticed when she laughs? Those little slender shoulders of hers actually shake."

"My *dear* Mr. Gower," says Mrs. Bethune, "do spare us! I'm sure you must be portraying Miss Bolton wrongly. Emotion—to betray emotion—how vulgar!"

"I like emotion," says Mr. Gower calmly; "I'm a perfect mass of it myself. Have you noticed Miss Bolton's laugh, Rylton?" to Sir Maurice, who had come up a moment ago, and had been listening to Mrs. Bethune's last remark. "It seems to run all through her. Not an inch that doesn't seem to enjoy it."

"Well, there aren't many inches," says Sir Maurice, with an amused air.

"And the laugh itself—so gay."

"You are an enthusiast," says Sir Maurice, who is standing near Mrs. Bethune.

"My dear fellow, who wouldn't be, in such a cause?" says the young cavalryman, with a rather conscious laugh.

"Here she is," says Mrs. Chichester, who is one of those people whom Nature has supplied with eyes behind and before.

Tita running up the slope at this moment like a young deer—a steep embankment that would have puzzled a good many people—puts an effectual end to the conversation. Mr. Gower graciously deigning to give her half of his rug, she sinks upon it gladly. She likes Gower.

Lady Rylton calls to her.

"Not on the grass, Tita dearest," cries she, in her little shrill, old-young voice. "Come here to me, darling. Next to me on this seat. Marian," to Mrs. Bethune, who has been sitting on the garden-chair with her, "you can make a little room, eh?"

"A great deal," says Marian.

She rises.

"Oh no! don't stir. Not for me," says Tita, making a little gesture to her to reseate herself. "No, thank you, Lady Rylton; I shall stay here. I'm quite happy here. I like sitting on the grass."

She makes herself a little more comfortable where she is, regardless of the honour Lady Rylton would have done her—regardless, too, of the frown with which her hostess now regards her.

Mr. Gower turns upon her a beaming countenance.

"What you really mean is," says he, "that you like sitting near *me*."

"Indeed I do not," says Tita indignantly.

"My dear girl, *think*. Am I to understand, then, that you don't like sitting near me?"

"Ah, that's a different thing," says Tita, with a little side-glance at him that shows a disposition to laughter.

"You see! you see!" says Mr. Gower triumphantly—he has a talent for teasing. "Then you do wish to sit beside me! And why not?" He expands his hands amiably. "Could you be beside a more delightful person?"

"Maybe I could," says Tita, with another glance.

Rylton, who is listening, laughs.

His laugh seems to sting Mrs. Bethune to her heart. She turns to him, and lets her dark eyes rest on his.

"What a little flirt!" says she contemptuously.

"Oh no! a mere child," returns he.

"Miss Bolton! What an answer!" Gower is now at the height of his enjoyment. "And after last night, too; you *must* remember what you said to me last night."

"Last night?" She is staring at him with a small surprised face—a delightful little face, as sweet as early spring. "What did I say to you last night?"

"And have you forgotten?" Mr. Gower has thrown tragedy into his voice. "*Already?* Do you mean to tell me that you don't recollect saying to me that you preferred me to all the rest of my sex?"

"I *never* said that!" says Tita, with emphasis; "never! never! Why should I say that?"

She looks at Gower as if demanding an answer.

"I'm not good at conundrums," says he. "Ask me another."

"No; I won't," says she. "Why?"

Upon this Mr. Gower rolls himself over in the rug, and covers his head. It is plain that answers are not to be got out of *him*.

"Did I say that?" says Tita, appealing to Sir Maurice.

"I hope not," returns he, laughing. "Certainly I did not hear it."

"And certainly he didn't either," says Tita with decision.

"After that," says Gower, unrolling himself, "I shall retire from public life; I shall give myself up to"—he pauses and looks round; a favourite ladies' paper is lying on the ground near him—"to literature."

He turns over on his side, and apparently becomes engrossed in it.

"Have you been playing, Maurice?" asks Mrs. Bethune presently.

Her tone is cold. That little speech of his to Tita, uttered some time ago, "I hope not," had angered her.

"No," returns he as coldly.

He is on one of his uncertain moods with regard to her. Distrust, disbelief, a sense of hopelessness—

all are troubling him.

"What a shame, Sir Maurice!" says Mrs. Chichester, leaning forward. As I have hinted, she would have flirted with a broomstick. "And you, who are our champion player."

"I'll play now if you will play with me," says Sir Maurice gallantly.

"A safe answer," looking at him with a pout, and through half-closed lids. She finds that sort of glance effective sometimes. "You know I don't play."

"Not *that* game," says Mr. Gower, who never can resist a thrust.

"I thought you were reading your paper," says Mrs. Chichester sharply. "Come, what's in it? I don't believe," scornfully, "you are reading it at all."

"I am, however," says Mr. Gower. "These ladies' papers are so full of information. I'm quite enthralled just now. I've got on to the Exchange and Mart business, and it's too exciting for *words*. Just listen to this: 'Two dozen old tooth-brushes (in *good* preservation) would be exchanged for a gold bangle (*unscratched*). Would not be sent on approval (mind, it must not be set *scratched!* good old toothbrushes!) without deposit of ten shillings. Address, 'Chizzler, office of this paper.'"

"It isn't true. I don't believe a word of it," says Tita, making a snatch at the paper.

"My dear girl, why not? Two dozen old toothbrushes. *Old* toothbrushes, you notice. Everything old now goes for a large sum, except," thoughtfully, "aunts."

He casts a lingering glance round, but providentially Miss Gower has disappeared.

"But toothbrushes! Show me that paper."

"Do you, then, disbelieve in my word?"

"Nobody could want a toothbrush."

"Some people want them awfully," says Mr. Gower. "Haven't you noticed?"

But here Sir Maurice sees it his duty to interfere.

"Miss Bolton, will you play this next set with me?" says he, coming up to Tita.

"Oh, I should *love* it!" cries she. "You are so good a player. Do get us some decent people to play against, though; I hate a weak game."

"Well, come, we'll try and manage it," says he, amused at her enthusiasm.

They move away together.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW GAMES WERE PLAYED, "OF SORTS"; AND HOW TITA WAS MUCH HARRIED, BUT HOW SHE BORE HERSELF VALIANTLY, AND HOW, NOT KNOWING OF HER VICTORIES, SHE WON ALL THROUGH.

There had been no question about it; it had been a walk-over. Even Lord Eshurst and Miss Staines, who are considered quite crack people at tennis in this part of the county, had not had a chance. Tita had been everywhere; she seemed to fly. Every ball caught, and every ball so well planted. Rylton had scarcely been in it, though a good player. That little thing was here and there and everywhere, yet Rylton could not say she poached. Whatever she did, however, she *won*.

She does not throw up her cap this time—perhaps she had seen a little of that laughter before—but she claps her hands joyfully, and pats Rylton's arm afterwards in a *bon camarade* fashion that seems to amuse him. And is she tired? There is no sense of fatigue, certainly, in the way she runs up the slope again, and flings herself gracefully upon the rug beside Mr. Gower. Mr. Gower has not stirred from that rug since. He seldom stirs. Perhaps he would not be quite so stout if he did.

"You won your game?" says Margaret Knollys, bending towards Tita, with a smile.

Old Lady Eshurst is smiling at her, too.

"Oh yes; how could I help it? Sir Maurice"—with a glance at the latter as he climbs the slope in turn—"plays like an angel."

"Oh no; it is you who do that," says he, laughing.

"Are you an angel, Miss Bolton?" asks Mrs. Bethune, who is standing next Rylton.

He had gone straight to her, but she had not forgiven his playing with the girl at all, and a sense of hatred towards Tita is warming her breast.

"I don't know," says Tita, with a slight grimace. It is not the answer expected. Marian had expected to see her shy, confused; Tita, on the contrary, is looking at her with calm, inquiring eyes. "Do you?" asks she.

"I have not gone into it," says Mrs. Bethune, with as distinct a sneer as she can allow herself.

Mr. Gower laughs.

"You're good at games," says he to Tita.

He might have meant her powers at tennis, he might have meant *anything*.

"That last game you are thinking of?"

"Decidedly, the last game," says Gower, who laughs again immoderately.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at," says Miss Bolton, with some indignation. "'They laugh who win,' is an old proverb. But *you* didn't win; you weren't in it."

"I expect I never shall be," says Gower. "Yet lookers-on have their advantage ascribed to them by a pitiful Providence. They see most of the game."

"It is I who should laugh," says Tita, who has not been following him. "*I* won—we"—looking, with an honest desire to be just to all people, at Sir Maurice—"we won."

"No, no; leave it in the singular," says Maurice, making her a little gesture of self-depreciation.

"You seem very active," says Margaret kindly. "I watched you at golf yesterday. You liked it?"

"Yes; there is so little else to like," says Tita, looking at her, "except my horses and my dogs."

"A horse is the best companion of all," says Mr. Woodleigh, his eyes bent on her charming little face.

"I'm not sure, the dogs are so kind, so affectionate; they *want* one so," says Tita. "And yet a horse—oh, I *do* love my last mount—a brown mare! She's lying up now."

"You ride, then?" says Sir Maurice.

"Ride! you bet!" says Tita. She rolls over on the rug, and, resting on her elbows, looks up at him; Lady Rylton watching, shudders. "I've been in the saddle all my life. Just before I came here I had a real good run—my uncle's groom had one horse, I had the other; it was over the downs. *I* won."

She rests her chin upon her hands.

Lady Rylton's face pales with horror. A race with a groom!

"Your uncle must give you good mounts," says Mr. Woodleigh.

"It is all he *does* give me," says the girl, with a pout. "Yes; I may ride, but that is all. I never *see* anybody—there is nobody to see; my uncle knows nobody."

Lady Rylton makes an effort. It is growing *too* dreadful. She turns to Mrs. Chichester.

"Why don't you play?" asks she.

"Tennis? I hate it; it destroys one's clothes so," says Mrs. Chichester. "And those shoes, they are terrible. If I knew any girls—I never do know them, as a rule—I should beg of them not to play tennis; it is destruction so far as feet go."

"Fancy riding so much as that!" says Mr. Woodleigh, who, with Sir Maurice and the others, has been listening to Tita's stories of hunts and rides gone and done. "Why, how *long* have you been hunting?"

"Ever since I was thirteen," says Tita.

"Why, that is about your age now, isn't it?" says Gower.

"We lived at Oakdean then," goes on Tita, taking, very properly, no notice of him, "and my father liked me to ride. My cousin was with us there, and he taught me. I rode a great deal before"—she pauses, and her lips quiver; she is evidently thinking of some grief that has entered into her young life and saddened it—"before I went to live with my uncle."

"It was your cousin who taught you to ride, then? Is he a son of the—the uncle with whom you now live?" asks Sir Maurice, who is rather ashamed of exhibiting such interest in her.

"No, no, indeed! He is a son of my aunt's—my father's sister. She married a man in Birmingham—a sugar merchant. I did love Uncle Joe," says Tita warmly.

"No wonder!" says Mrs. Bethune. "I wish *I* had an uncle a sugar merchant. It does sound sweet."

"I'm not sure that you would think my uncle Joe sweet!" says Miss Bolton thoughtfully. "He wasn't good to look at. He had the biggest mouth that ever *I* saw, and his nose was little and turned up, but I loved him. I love him now, even when he is gone. And one *does* forget, you know! He said such good things to people, and"—covering her little face with her hands, and bursting into an irrepressible laugh—"he told such funny stories!"

Lady Rylton makes a sudden movement.

"Dear Lady Eshurst, wouldn't you like to come and see the houses?" asks she.

"I am afraid I must be going home," says old Lady Eshurst. "It is very late; you must forgive my staying so long, but your little friend—by-the-bye, is she a friend or relation?"

"A friend!" says Lady Rylton sharply.

"Well, she is so entertaining that I could not bear to go away sooner."

"Yes—yes; she is very charming," says Lady Rylton, as she hurries Lady Eshurst down the steps that lead to the path below.

Good heavens! If she should hear some of Uncle Joe's funny stories! She takes Lady Eshurst visibly in tow, and walks her out of hearing.

"What a good seat you must have!" says Mr. Woodleigh presently, who has been dwelling on what Tita has said about her riding.

"Oh, pretty well! Everyone should ride," says Tita indifferently. "I despise a man who can't conquer a horse. I," laughing, "never saw the horse that *I* couldn't conquer."

"You? Look at your hands!" says Gower, laughing.

"Well, what's the matter with them?" says she. "My cousin, when he was riding, used to say they were made of iron."

"Of velvet, rather."

"No. He said my heart was made of that." She laughs gaily, and suddenly looking up at Rylton, who is looking down at her, she fixes her eyes on his. She spreads her little hands abroad, brown as berries though they are with exposure to all sorts of weather. They are small brown hands, and very delicately shaped. "They are not so bad after all, are they?" says she.

"They are very pretty," smiles Rylton, returning her gaze.

Suddenly for the first time it occurs to him that she has a beauty that is all her own.

"Oh no! there is nothing pretty about me," says Tita.

She gives a sudden shrug of her shoulders. She is still lying on the rug, her face resting on the palms of her hands. Again she lifts her eyes slowly to Rylton; it is an entirely inconsequent glance—a purely idle glance—and yet it suddenly occurs to Mrs. Bethune, watching her narrowly, that there is coquetry in it; undeveloped, certainly, but *there*. She is now a child; but later on?

Maurice is smiling back at the child as if amused. Mrs. Bethune lays her hands upon his arm—Lady Rylton has gone away with old Lady Eshurst.

"Maurice! there will be just time for a walk before tea," says she in a whisper, her beautiful face uplifted very near to his. Her eyes are full of promise.

He turns with her.

"Sir Maurice! Sir Maurice!" cries Tita; "remember our match at golf to-morrow!" Sir Maurice looks back. "Mr. Gower and I, against you and Mrs. Bethune. You *do* remember?"

"Yes, and we shall win," says Mrs. Bethune, with a cold smile.

"Oh no! don't think it. We shall beat you into a cocked hat!" cries Tita gaily.

"Good heavens! how vulgar she is!" says Mrs. Bethune.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE ARGUMENT GROWS HIGHER; AND HOW MARIAN LOSES HER TEMPER, AND HOW MARGARET OBJECTS TO THE RUIN OF ONE YOUNG LIFE.

"She is insufferable—intolerable!" says Lady Rylton, almost hysterically. She is sitting in the drawing-room with Margaret and Mrs. Bethune, near one of the windows that overlook the tennis court. The guests of the afternoon have gone; only the house-party remains, and still, in the dying daylight, the tennis balls are being tossed to and fro. Tita's little form may be seen darting from side to side; she is playing again with Sir Maurice.

"She is a very young girl, who has been brought up without a mother's care," says Miss Knollys, who has taken a fancy to the poor hoyden, and would defend her.

"Her manners this afternoon!—her actions—her fatal admissions!" says Lady Rylton, who has not forgiven that word or two about the sugar merchant.

"She spoke only naturally. *She* saw no reason why she should not speak of—"

"Don't be absurd, Margaret!" Sharply. "You know, as well as I do, that she is detestable."

"I am quite glad you have formed that idea of her," says Miss Knollys, "as it leads me to hope you do not now desire to marry her to Maurice."

After all, there are, perhaps, moments when Margaret is not as perfect as one believes her. She can't, for example, resist this thrust.

"Decidedly I don't desire to marry her to Maurice," says Lady Rylton angrily. "I have told you that often enough, I think; but for all that Maurice must marry her. It is his last chance!"

"Tessie," says Margaret sharply, "if you persist in this matter, and bring it to the conclusion you have in view, do you know what will happen? You will make your only child miserable! I warn you of that." Miss Knollys' voice is almost solemn.

"You talk as if Maurice was the only person in the world to be made miserable," says Lady Rylton, leaning back in her chair and bursting into tears—at all events, it must be supposed it is tears that are going on behind the little lace fragment pressed to her eyes. "Am not I ten times more miserable? I, who have to give my only son—as" (sobbing) "you most admirably describe it, Margaret—to such a girl as that! Good heavens! What can his sufferings be to mine?" She wipes her eyes daintily, and sits up again. "You hurt me so, dear Margaret," she says plaintively, "but I'm *sure* you do not mean it."

"No, no, of course," says Miss Knollys, as civilly as she can. She is feeling a little disgusted.

"And as for this affair—objectionable as the girl is, still one must give and take a little when one's fortunes are at the ebb. And I will save my dearest Maurice at all risks if I can, no matter what grief it costs *me*. Who am I"—with a picturesque sigh—"that I should interfere with the prospects of my child? And this girl! If Maurice can be persuaded to have her—"

"My dear Tessie, what a word!" says Margaret, rising, with a distinct frown. "Has he *only* to ask, then, and have?"

"Beyond doubt," says Lady Rylton insolently, waving her fan to and fro, "if he does it in the right way.

In all my experience, my dear Margaret, I have never known a woman to frown upon a man who was as handsome, as well-born, as *chic* as Maurice! Even though the man might be a—well"—smiling and lifting her shoulders—"it's a rude word, but—well, a very devil!"

She looks deliberately at Margaret over her fan, who really appears in this dull light *nearly* as young as she is. The look is a cruel one, hideously cruel. Even Marian Bethune, whose bowels of compassion are extraordinary small, changes colour, and lets her red-brown eyes rest on the small woman lounging in the deep chair with a rather murderous gaze.

Yet Lady Rylton smiles on, enjoying the changes in Margaret's face. It is a terrible smile, coming from so fragile a creature.

Margaret's face has grown white, but she answers coldly and with deliberation. All that past horrible time—her lover, his unworthiness, his desertion—all her young, *young* life lies once more massacred before her.

"The women who give in to such fascination, such mere outward charms, are fools!" says she with a strength that adorns her.

"Oh, come! Come now, dearest Margaret," says her aunt, with the gayest of little laughs, "would you call *yourself* a fool? Why, remember, your own dear Harold was——"

"Pray spare me!" says Miss Knollys, in so cold, so haughty, so commanding a tone, that even Lady Rylton sinks beneath it. She makes an effort to sustain her position and laughs lightly, but for all that she lets her last sentence remain a fragment.

"You think Maurice will propose to this Miss Bolton?" says Marian Bethune, leaning forward. There is something sarcastic in her smile.

"He must. It is detestable, of course. One would like a girl in his own rank, but there are so few of them with money, and when there is one, her people want her to marry a Duke or a foreign Prince—so tiresome of them!"

"It is all such folly," says Margaret, knitting her brows.

"Utter folly," says Lady Rylton. "That is what makes it so wise! It would be folly to marry a satyr—satyrs are horrid—but if the satyr had *millions!* Oh, the wisdom of it!"

"You go too far!" says Margaret. "Money is not everything."

"And Maurice is not a satyr," says Mrs. Bethune, a trifle unwisely. She has been watching the players on the ground below. Lady Rylton looks at her.

"Of course *you* object to it," says she.

"I!" says Marian. "Why should I object to it? I talk of marriage only in the abstract."

"I am glad of that!" Lady Rylton's eyes are still fixed on hers. "This will be a veritable marriage, I assure you; I have set my mind on it. It is terrible to contemplate, but one must give way sometimes; yet the thought of throwing that girl into the arms of darling Maurice——"

She breaks off, evidently overcome, yet behind the cobweb she presses to her cheeks she has an eye on Marian.

"I don't think Maurice's arms could hold her," says Mrs. Bethune, with a low laugh. It is a strange laugh. Lady Rylton's glance grows keener. "Such a mere doll of a thing. A mite!" She laughs again, but this time (having caught Lady Rylton's concentrated gaze) in a very ordinary manner—the passion, the anger has died out of it.

"Yes, she's a mere mite," says Lady Rylton. "She is positively trivial! She is in effect a perfect idiot in some ways. You know I have tried to impress her—to show her that she is not altogether below our level—as she certainly *is*—but she has refused to see my kindness. She—she's very fatiguing," says Lady Rylton, with a long-suffering sigh. "But one gets accustomed to grievances. This girl, just because she is hateful to me, is the one I must take into my bosom. She is going to give her fortune to Maurice!"

"And Maurice?" asks Margaret.

"Is going to take it," returns his mother airily. "And is going to give her, what she has never had—a *name!*"

"A cruel compact," says Margaret slowly, but with decision. "I think this marriage should not be so much as thought of! That child! and Maurice, who cares nothing for her. Marian"—Miss Knollys turns suddenly to Marian, who has withdrawn behind the curtains, as if determined to have nothing to say further to the discussion—"Marian, come here. Say you think Maurice should not marry this silly child—this baby."

"Oh! as for me," says Mrs. Bethune, coming out from behind the curtains, her face a little pale, "what is my weight in this matter? Nothing! nothing! Let Maurice marry as he will."

"*As he will!*" Lady Rylton repeats her words, and, rising, comes towards her. "Why don't you answer?" says she. "We want your answer. Give it!"

"I have no answer," says Mrs. Bethune slowly. "Why should he not marry Miss Bolton?—and again, why should he? Marriage, as we have been told all our lives, is but a lottery—they should have said a mockery," with a little bitter smile. "One could have understood that."

"Then you advise Maurice to marry this girl?" asks Lady Rylton eagerly.

"Oh, no, no! I advise nothing," says Marian, with a little wave of her arms.

"But why?" demands Lady Rylton angrily.

She had depended upon Marian to support her against Margaret.

"Simply because I won't," says Mrs. Bethune, her strange eyes beginning to blaze.

"Because you daren't?" questions Lady Rylton, with a sneer.

"I don't understand you," says Marian coldly.

"Don't you?" Lady Rylton's soft, little, fair face grows diabolical. "Then let me explain." Margaret makes a movement towards her, but she waves her back. "Pray let me explain, Margaret. Our dear Marian is so intensely dull that she wants a word in season. We all know why she objects to a marriage of any sort. She made a fiasco of her own first marriage, and now hopes——"

She would have continued her cruel speech but that Mrs. Bethune, who has risen, breaks into it. She comes forward in a wild, tempestuous fashion, her eyes afire, her nostrils dilated! Her beautiful red hair seems alight as she descends upon Lady Rylton.

"And that marriage!" says she, in a suffocating tone. "Who made it? *Who?*" She looks like a fury. There is hatred, an almost murderous hatred, in the glance she casts at the little, languid, pretty woman before her, who looks back at her with uplifted shoulders, and an all-round air of surprise and disapprobation. "*You* to taunt me!" says she, in a low, condensed tone. "*You*, who hurried, who *forced* me into a marriage with a man I detested! You, who gave me to understand, when I resisted, that I had no place on this big earth except a pauper's place—a place in a workhouse!"

She stands tall, grave, magnificent, in her fury before Lady Rylton, who, in spite of the courage born of want of feeling, now shrinks from her as if affrighted.

"If you persist in going on like this," says she, pressing her smelling-bottle to her nose, "I must ask you to go away—to go at once. I hate scenes. You *must* go!"

"I went away once," says Mrs. Bethune, standing pale and cold before her, "at your command—I went to the home of the man you selected for me. What devil's life I led with him you may guess at. *You* knew him, I did not. I was seventeen then." She pauses; the breath she draws seems to rive her body in twain. "I came back——" she says presently.

"A widow?"

"A widow—*thank God!*"

A silence follows; something of tragedy seems to have fallen into the air—with that young lovely creature standing there, upright, passionate, her arms clasped behind her head, as the heroine of it. The sunlight from the dying day lights up the red, rich beauty of her hair, the deadly pallor of her skin. Through it all the sound of the tennis-balls from below, as they hurry to and fro through the hair, can be heard. Perhaps it reaches her. She flings herself suddenly into a chair, and bursts out laughing.

"Let us come back to common-sense," cries she. "What were we talking of? The marriage of Maurice to this little plebeian—this little female Croesus. Well, what of the argument—what?"

Her manner is a little excited.

"I, for one, object to the marriage," says Margaret distinctly. "The child is too young and too rich! She should be given a chance; she should not be coerced and drawn into a mesh, as it were, without her knowledge."

"A mesh? Do you call a marriage with my son a mesh?" asks Lady Rylton angrily. "He of one of the oldest families in England, and she a nobody!"

"There is no such thing as a nobody," says Miss Knollys calmly. "This girl has intellect, mind, a *soul!* She has even money! She *must* be considered."

"She has no birth!" says Lady Rylton. "If you are going in for Socialistic principles, Margaret, pray do not expect *me* to follow you. I despise folly of that sort."

"I am not a Socialist," says Margaret slowly, "and yet why cannot this child be accepted as one of ourselves? Where is the great difference? You object to her marrying your son, yet you *want* to marry her to your son. How do you reconcile it? Surely you are more of Socialist than I am. You would put the son of a baronet and the daughter of heaven knows who on an equality."

"Never!" says Lady Rylton. "You don't understand. She will always be just as she is, and Maurice——"

"And their children?" asks Margaret.

Here Mrs. Bethune springs to her feet.

"Good heavens! Margaret, have you not gone far enough?" says she. If her face had been pale before, it is livid now. "Why, this marriage—this marriage"—she beats her hand upon a table near her—"one would think it was a fact accomplished!"

"I was only saying," says Miss Knollys, looking with a gentle glance at Marian, "that if Maurice *were* to marry this girl——"

"It would be an honour to her," interrupts Lady Rylton hotly.

"It would be a degradation to him," says Margaret coldly. "He does not love her."

She might have said more, but that suddenly Marian Bethune stops her. The latter, who is leaning against the curtains of the window, breaks into a wild little laugh.

"Love—what is love?" cries she. "Oh, foolish Margaret! Do not listen to her, Tessie, do not listen."

She folds the soft silken curtains round her slender figure, and, hidden therein, still laughs aloud with a wild passion of mirth.

"It is you who are foolish," cries Margaret, with some agitation.

"I?" She lets the curtains go; they fall in a sweep behind her. She looks out at Margaret, still laughing. Her face is like ashes. "You speak too strongly," says she.

"Do *you* think I could speak too strongly?" asks Margaret, looking intently at her. It is a questioning glance. "You! Do *you* think Maurice ought to ask this poor, ignorant girl to marry him? Do *you* advise him to take this step?"

"Why, it appears he must take some step," says Marian. "Why not this?"

Margaret goes close to her and speaks in so low a tone that Lady Rylton cannot hear her.

"His honour, is that nothing to you?" says she.

"To me? What have I got to do with his honour?" says Mrs. Bethune, with a little expressive gesture.

"Oh, Marian!" says Miss Knollys.

She half turns away as if in disgust, but Marian follows her and catches her sleeve.

"You mean——" says she.

"Must I explain? With his heart full of you, do you think he should marry this girl?"

"Oh, *his* heart!" says Mrs. Bethune. "Has he a heart? Dear Margaret, don't be an enthusiast; be like

everybody else. It is so much more comfortable."

"You can put it off like this," says Miss Knollys in a low tone. "It is very simple; but you should think. I have always thought you—you liked Maurice, but you were a—a friend of his. Save him from this. Don't let him marry this child."

"I don't think he will marry a child!" says Mrs. Bethune, laughing.

"You mean——"

"I mean nothing at all—nothing, really," says Marian. "But that baby! My dear Margaret, how impossible!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW A STORM RAGED; AND HOW, WHEN A MAN AND WOMAN MET FACE TO FACE, THE VICTORY—FOR A WONDER—WENT TO THE MAN.

There has been a second scene between Lady Rylton and Sir Maurice—this time a terrible scene. She had sent for him directly after dinner, and had almost commanded him to marry Miss Bolton. She had been very bitter in her anger, and had said strange things of Marian. Sir Maurice had come off triumphant, certainly, if greatly injured, and with his heart on fire. He had, at all events, sworn he would not marry the little Bolton girl. Those perpetual insinuations! What had his mother meant by saying that Marian was laying herself out to catch Lord Dunkerton, an old baron in the neighbourhood, with some money and a damaged reputation? That could not be true—he would not believe it. That old beast! Marian would not so much as look at him. And yet—had she not been very civil to him at that ball last week?

Coming out from his mother's boudoir, a perfect storm of fury in his heart, he finds himself face to face with Marian. Something in his face warns her. She would have gone by him with a light word or two, but, catching her by the wrist, he draws her into a room on his left.

"You have had another quarrel with your mother," says she sympathetically, ignoring the anger blazing in his eyes. "About that silly girl?"

"No. About you!"

His tone is short—almost violent.

"About me?"

She changes colour.

"Yes, you. She accuses you of encouraging that wretched old man, Dunkerton. Do you *hear*? Speak! Is it true?"

"This is madness!" says Marian, throwing out her hands. "How *could* you believe such folly? That old man! Why will you give ear to such gossip?"

"Put an end to it, then," says he savagely.

"I? How can I put an end to it?"

"By marrying *me*!"

He stands opposite to her, almost compelling her gaze in return. Mrs. Bethune gives it fearlessly.

"Maurice dearest, you are excited now. Your mother—she is *so* irritating. I know her. Marriage, as we now stand, would mean quite dreadful things. Do be reasonable!"

"You talk of reason," says he passionately. "Does love reason? No! I will hear your last word now."

"Are you condemning me, then, to death?" asks she, smiling delicately, and laying two large but delicate hands upon his arms.

He shakes her off.

"Answer me. Will you marry me, or will you not?"

"This is too sudden, Maurice!"

A little fire is kindling in her own eyes; she had objected to that last repulsion.

"Sudden! After all these months!" He pauses. "Is it to be Dunkerton or me?" asks he violently.

"Please do not bring Lord Dunkerton into this discussion," says she coldly.

"I certainly shall."

"You mean that I——"

"Have encouraged him. So I hear, at all events, and—there are things I remember."

"For the matter of that," says she, throwing up her beautiful head, "there are things I remember too! You—you dare to come here and accuse *me* of falsity when I have watched you all day making steady court to that wretched little plebeian, playing tennis with her all the day long, and far into the evening! No! I may have said half a dozen words to Lord Dunkerton, but you—how many half-dozen words have you said to Miss Bolton? Come, answer me that, as we seem bent on riddles."

"All this is as nothing," says Rylton. "You know, as well as I do, that Miss Bolton has not a thought of mine! I want only one thing, the assurance that you love me, and I put it at marriage. Will you link your fate with mine, low down though it is at present? If you will, Marian"—he comes closer to her and lays his hands upon her shoulders, and gazes at her with eyes full filled with honest love—"I shall work for you to the last day of my life. If you will not——"

He pauses—he looks at her—he waits. But no answer comes from her.

"Marian, take courage," says he softly—very softly. "My darling, is money everything?"

She suddenly leans back from him, and looks fair in his eyes.

"It is, it is," says she hoarsely. "I *can't* again go through what I suffered before. Wait, *do* wait—something—something will happen——"

"You refuse me?" says he, in a lifeless tone.

"Not that. Don't speak like that. Don't leave me, Maurice."

"It is our last hour," says he deliberately. "Be sure of that. If money is so much to you—if money counts so far beyond all that a man can give you of his heart and soul—then take it."

"And you," says she, "are you not seeking money, too? This girl, this little *fool*; your mother has led you to think of her. You will marry her!"

"I will marry you," says he coldly, "if you will marry me."

"I have told you that it is impossible"—she draws a deep breath—"at present."

"You will not trust me, then, to make a fortune for you?"

"A fortune! It takes so *long* to make; and," smiling, and drawing nearer to him, and suddenly flinging her arms around his neck, "are we not happy as we are?"

"No." He loosens her arms lightly, and, still holding them, looks at her. How fair she is, how desirable! "Marian," says he hoarsely, "think! It is indeed my last word. Will you trust yourself to me as things are, or will you reject me? Marian, say you will marry me as I now am—poor, ruined."

He holds her, gazing at her despairingly. She would have spoken, perhaps, but no words come to her; no words to soften her grim determination. She *will* not marry him poor—and yet she loves him.

Rylton, with a stifled oath, pushes her from him.

"This is the end," says he.

He goes to the door.

"Maurice!" says she faintly.

He turns.

"Well, will you marry me to-morrow?" asks he mockingly.

"No. But——"

"There is no time for 'buts,'" says he.

He opens the door and closes it sharply behind him.

Mrs. Bethune flings herself back into a chair, and presses her handkerchief to her face.

"Oh, it is nothing, nothing," says she presently. She gets up, and, standing before a glass, arranges her hair and presses her eyebrows into shape. "He gets impatient, that is all. He will never be able to live without me. As for that absurd child, Maurice would not look at *her*. No, I am sure of him, quite, quite sure; to-morrow he will come back to me, repentant."

CHAPTER IX.

HOW MAURICE PLACES HIS LIFE IN THE HANDS OF THE HOYDEN, AND HOW SHE TELLS HIM MANY THINGS, AND DESIRES MANY THINGS OF HIM.

Maurice had said it was his last word. He goes straight from Marian Bethune to one of the reception-rooms, called the lesser ballroom, where some dancing is going on. His face is a little white, but beyond that he betrays no emotion whatever. He feels even surprised at himself. Has he lost all feeling? Passing Randal Gower he whispers a gay word or two to him. He feels in brilliant spirits.

Tita Bolton is dancing, but when her dance comes to an end he goes to her and asks her for the next. Yes; he can have it. She dances like a little fairy, and when the waltz is at an end he goes with her, half mechanically, towards the conservatory at the end of the room.

His is calm now, quite calm; the chatter of the child has soothed him. It had been a pleasure to dance with her, to laugh when she laughed, to listen to her nonsense. As he walks with her towards the flowers, he tells himself he is not in the least unhappy, though always quite close to him, at his side, someone seems to be whispering:

"It is all over! it is all over!"

Well, so much the better. She has fooled him too long.

The conservatory at the end of the lesser ballroom leads on to the balcony outside, and at the end of that is another and larger conservatory, connected with the drawing-room. Towards this he would have led her, but Tita, in the middle of the balcony, stops short.

"But I want to dance," says she.

That far-off house, full of flowers, seems very much removed from the music.

"You have been playing tennis all day," says Rylton. "You must be tired. It is bad for you to fatigue yourself so much. You have had enough dancing for awhile. Come and sit with me. I, too, am tired."

"Well, for awhile," says she reluctantly.

It is with evident regret that she takes every step that leads her away from the dancing-room.

The larger conservatory is but dimly lit with lamps covered with pale pink shades. The soft musical tinkling of a fountain, hidden somewhere amongst the flowering shrubs, adds a delicious sense of coolness to the air. The delicate perfume of heliotrope mingles with the breath of the roses, yellow and red and amber, that, standing in their pots, nod their heads drowsily. The begonias, too, seem half dead with sleep. The drawing-room beyond is deserted.

"Now, is not this worth a moment's contemplation?" says Rylton, pressing her gently into a deep lounging chair that seems to swallow up her little figure. "It has its own charm, hasn't it?"

He has flung himself into another chair beside her, and is beginning to wonder if he might have a cigarette. He might almost have believed himself content, but for that hateful monotonous voice at his ear.

"Oh, it *is* pretty," says Tita, glancing round her. "It is lovely."

It reminds me of Oakdean."

"Oakdean?"

"My old home," says she softly—"where I lived with my father."

"Ah, tell me something of your life," says Rylton kindly.

No idea of making himself charming to her is in his thoughts. He has, indeed, but one idea, and that is to encourage her to talk, so that he himself may enjoy the bliss of silence.

"There is nothing," says she quickly. "It has been a stupid life. I was very happy at Oakdean, when," hesitating, "papa was alive; but now I have to live at Rickfort, with Uncle George, and," simply, "I'm not happy."

"What's the matter with Rickfort?"

"Nothing. It's Uncle George that there is something the matter with. Rickfort is my house, too, but I hate it; it is so gloomy. I'm sure," with a shrug of her shoulders, "Uncle George might have it, and welcome, if only he wouldn't ask *me* to live there with him."

"Uncle George seems to make a poor show," says Rylton.

"He's horrid!" says Miss Bolton, without reservation. "He's a *beast!* He hates me, and I hate him."

"Oh, no!" says Rylton, roused a little.

The child's face is so earnest. He feels a little amused, and somewhat surprised. She seems the last person in the world capable of hatred.

"Yes, I do," says she, nodding her delightful little head, "and he knows it. People say a lot about family resemblances, but it seems wicked to think Uncle George is papa's brother. For my part," recklessly, "I don't believe it."

"Perhaps he's a changeling," says Sir Maurice.

"Oh, don't be silly," says Miss Bolton. "Now, listen to this." She leans forward, her elbows on her knees, her eyes glistening with wrath. "I had a terrier, a *lovely* one, and she had six puppies, and, would you believe it! he drowned every one of them—said they were ill-bred, or something. And they weren't, they *couldn't* have been; they were perfectly beautiful, and my darling Scrub fretted herself nearly to death after them. I begged almost on my knees that he would leave her *one*, and he wouldn't." Her eyes are now full of tears. "He is a beast!" says she. This last word seems almost comic, coming from her pretty childish lips.

"Well, but you see," says Rylton, "some men pride themselves on the pedigree of their dogs, and perhaps your uncle——"

"Oh, if you are going to defend him!" says she, rising with a stiff little air.

"I'm not—I'm not, indeed," says Rylton. "Nothing could excuse his refusing you that one puppy. But in other ways he is not unkind to you?"

"Yes, he is; he won't let me go anywhere."

"He has let you come here."

"Just because your mother is *Lady* Rylton!" says the girl, with infinite scorn. She looks straight at him. "My uncle is ashamed because we are nobodies—because his father earned his money by trade. He hates everyone because of that. My father," proudly, "was above it all."

"I think I should like to have known your father," says Rylton, admiring the pride in her gray eyes.

"It would have done you good," returns she thoughtfully. She pauses, as if still thinking, and then, "As for me, I have not been good at all since I lost him."

"One can see that," says Rylton. "Crime sits rampant in your eyes."

At this she laughs too; but presently she stops short, and turns to him.

"It is all very well for you to laugh!" says she ruefully. "You have not to go home next week to live again with Uncle George!"

"I begin to hate Uncle George!" says Rylton. "You see how you are demoralizing me! But, surely, if you cannot live in peace with him, there must be others—other relations—who would be glad to chaperone you!"

"No," says the girl, shaking her head sadly. "For one thing, I have *no* relations—at least, none who could look after me; and, for another, by my father's will, I must stay with Uncle George until my marriage."

"Until your marriage!" Sir Maurice laughs. "Forgive me! I should not have laughed," says he, "especially as your emancipation seems a long way off."

Really, looking at her in the subdued lights of those pink lamps, she seems a mere baby.

"I don't see why it *should* be so far off," says Tita, evidently affronted. "Lots of girls get married at seventeen; I've heard of people who were married at sixteen! But *they* must have been fools. No? I don't want to be married, though, if I did, I should be able to get rid of Uncle George. But what I should like to do would be to run away!"

"Where?" asks Rylton, rather abominably, it must be confessed.

"Oh, I don't know," confusedly. "I haven't thought it out."

"Well, *don't*," says he kindly.

"That is what everyone would say," impatiently. "In the meantime, I *cannot go* on living with my uncle. No; I can't." She leans back, and, flinging her arms behind her neck, looks with a little laughing pout at Rylton. "Some day I shall do something dreadful," says she.

She is charming, posing so. Rylton looks at her. How pretty she is! How guileless! How far removed from worldly considerations! His affair with Marian is at an end. Never to be renewed! That is settled. He had given her a last word, and she had spurned it.

After all, why should he not marry this charming child? The marriage would please his mother, and restore the old name to something of its ancient grandeur. And as for himself—why, it matters nothing to him.

"It is all over. It is all over."

Again that teasing voice in his ear.

Well, if it *is* all over, so much to the good. But as for this girl sitting near him, if he must take her to be his wife, it shall be at least in good faith. She shall know all. Probably she will refuse him. For one thing, because he is ten years older than she is—a century in the eyes of a child of seventeen; and, for another, because she may not like him at all. For all he knows, she may hate him as she hates her uncle George, in certain ways.

However it is, he will tell her that he has no love for her. It shall be all fair and above-board between them. He can give her a title. She can give him money, without which the title would be useless.

On the instant he makes up his mind to risk the proposal. In all probability she will say "No" to it. But if not—if she accepts him—he swears to himself he will be true to her.

"The most dreadful thing you could do," says he, "would be to marry a man who did not love you."

"Eh?" says she.

She seems surprised.

"To marry a man, then, with whom you weren't in love!"

"Oh, *that*, that's nothing," says she grandly. "I'd do a great deal more than *that* to get away from my uncle. But"—sorrowfully—"nobody's asked me."

She says it so innocently, so sweetly, that Rylton's heart grows cold within him. To ask her! To tempt this child—

"But," says he, looking away from her religiously, "would you marry a man who was not in love with *you*?"

"Not in love with me?"

"No. Not actually in love, but who admired—liked you?"

"But a man who wasn't in love with me wouldn't want to marry me," says Tita. "At least, that's what the novels say."

"He might," says Rylton deliberately. He leans forward. "Will you marry *me*?"

He almost laughs aloud as he makes his extraordinary proposal. If it fails, as it certainly *must*, he will throw up the remnant of his life here and go abroad. And, at all events, he can so far satisfy his mother as to assure her that he had placed his all at this little heiress's feet.

"You! You!" says she.

She stares at him.

"Even me! You said a moment ago that no man would ask you to marry him for any reason less than love; but I—I am not in love with you, and yet I ask you to marry me."

He pauses here, shocked at his own words, his brutal audacity.

"But why?" asks the girl slowly.

She is looking at him, deep inquiry and wonder in her great gray eyes.

"Because I am poor and you are rich," says he honestly. "Your money could redeem this old place, and I could give you a title—a small thing, no doubt."

"You could take me away from my uncle," says the girl thoughtfully. There is silence for awhile, and then—"I should be able to do as I liked," says she, as if communing with herself.

"That certainly," says Rylton, who feels as if all things should be allowed her at this juncture, considering how little it is in his power to allow.

"And you?" She looks up at him. "*You* could do as you liked, too!"

"Thank you!" says Rylton.

He smiles in spite of himself, but the girl continues very grave.

"You say you have nothing," says she, "but this house?"

"It is useless arguing about it," returns Rylton; "this house will go shortly with all the rest. For myself, I don't care much really, but my mother—she would feel it. That's why I say you can help us, if you will."

"I should like to help *you*!" says Tita, still very slowly.

She lays a stress upon the word "you."

"Well, will you trust yourself to me?"

"Trust myself!"

"Will you marry me? Consider how it is. I lay it all before you. I am not in love with you, and I have not a penny in the world. Literally, I have nothing."

"You have a mother," says Tita. "I," pathetically, "have nothing."
It is plain to him that she had set great store by her dead father.

"I have nothing, really. But you say this house must go?"

"Not if you will help me to keep it."

"I should not like to live here," says Tita, with some haste. And then in a low tone, "Your mother would live here?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, and I—I have been very unhappy with Uncle George," says she. Her air is so naïve that Rylton bursts out laughing. After all, the last thing he would desire either would be to live here with his mother.

"You would not have to make this place your home," says he. It had never been a home to him since

his father's death. "You shall command me in this matter; I shall live at Oakdean if that is your desire." Indeed, it seems to him it would be a great relief to get away from the Hall, from his mother, from—

"To live at Oakdean!" The girl's face grows transfigured. She stares at him as if hardly seeing him, however; her thoughts have carried her back to past delights in which he has had no part. "To live there again!" She sighs quickly, excitedly. "You haven't seen it, you don't *know*," says she. "But it is the most beautiful place on earth." She puts out her hand and lays it on his. "If I marry you, will you promise that I shall live at Oakdean?"

"If you will do me the honour to marry me, you shall live just where you like," returns he. Indeed, to him it is now a matter of indifference where life may be dragged out to its weary end. But Tita fails to see the apathy in his manner.

"Then, it is settled," cries she joyfully. She clasps her hands. "Oh, how *good* of you!" says she. "What a blessing I came here! Fancy getting rid of Uncle George and getting back to Oakdean all in one stroke!" Suddenly she looks round at him; there is almost terror in her gaze. "You are sure you *mean* it?" says she.

"I mean it. But, Tita,"—he takes one of her hands and holds it between his own, and regards her with some anxiety—"have you thought it all out? I have told you the truth, you know. I have told you that I am not in love with you."

"In love with me! I'm sure I hope not," says Tita with a disgusted air. "Don't put yourself out about that. I should hate you if you were in love with me. Fancy a person following me about always, and saying silly things to me, and perhaps wanting to kiss me! You," anxiously looking at him with searching eyes, "you wouldn't want to kiss me, would you?"

She looks so pretty as she puts this startling question, that Rylton loses himself a little.

"I don't know."

"Then you had *better* know, and at *once*," says Miss Bolton, with decision.

The whole affair seems to be trembling in the balance. A sense of amusement has most unfortunately seized on Rylton, and is shaking him to his very heart's core. To marry a girl who even objected to a kiss! It sounds like a French play. He subdues his untimely mirth by an effort, and says gravely, "How can I promise you that I shall never want to kiss you? I may grow very fond of you in time, and you—but, of course, that is far more improbable—may grow fond of me."

"Even so," begins she hotly. She pauses, however, as if some thought had struck her. "Well, let it stay so," says she. "If ever I do grow to like you as much as you fancy, why, then you may kiss me—sometimes."

"That's a bargain," says he.

Again he suppresses a desire to laugh. It seems to him that she is intensely interesting in some way.

"In the meantime," says he, with quite a polite air, "may I not kiss you now?"

"No!" says she. It is the lightest monosyllable, but fraught with much energy. She tilts the shoulder nearest to him, and peeps at him over it, with a half-merry little air.

She sets Rylton's mind at work. Is she only a silly charming child, or an embryo flirt of the first water? Whatever she is, at all events, she is very new, very fresh—an innovation! He continues to look at her.

"Really no?" questions he.

She nods her head.

"And yet you have said 'Yes' to everything else?"

She nods her head again. She nods it even twice.

"Yes, I shall marry you," says she.

"I may tell my mother?"

Miss Bolton sits up. A little troubled expression grows within her eyes.

"Oh! must you?" cried she. "She *will* be mad. She won't let you marry me—I know she won't. She—

hates me."

"My dear child, why?" Rylton's tone is shocked. The very truth in her declaration makes it the more shocking. And how does she know? His mother has been sweetness itself to her *before* the curtain.

"Never mind, I know," says Tita. "I feel things. They come to me. I don't blame her. I'm sure I'm often horrid. I know that, when I look at other people. When I look at——"

She pauses.

"Look at whom?"

"At your cousin."

"My cousin!"

"Yes! You love her, don't you?"

"Love her!" He has turned suddenly as pale as death. "What do you mean?" asks he in a low voice.

"I love her, any way," says Tita. "I think Miss Knollys is the nicest person in all the world."

"Oh, Margaret?" says he. He says it involuntarily. The relief is so great that it compels him to give himself away.

"Why, who else?" says Tita. "Who did *you* think I meant?"

"Who *could* I think?" says he, recovering. "Even now I am surprised. Margaret, though very superior in most ways, is not always beloved."

"But you love her?"

"Oh yes, *I* do!"

"I am glad of that," says Tita. "Because I love her more than anyone I know. And I have been thinking"—she looks at him quickly—"I have been thinking that"—nervously—"that when I marry you, Miss Knollys will be my cousin, too, in a sort of way, and that perhaps she will let me call her by her name. Do you," anxiously, "think she will?"

"I know she will." His answer is terse. He has barely yet recovered from the shock she had innocently given him.

"And your mother?" asks she, going back to the first question. "Do you think she will like you to marry me? Oh, do persuade her!"

"Make no mistake about my mother, Tita; she will receive you with open arms." He feels as if he were lying when he says this, yet is it not the truth? "She will be glad to receive you as a daughter."

"Will she? She doesn't look like it," says Tita, "not sometimes when I—*look back at her!*"

She rises, and makes a step towards the door of the conservatory that will lead her to the balcony, and so back to the dancing-room.

"Tita? Bear with my mother," says he gently, and in a low voice.

The girl turns to him, her whole young, generous heart in her voice.
"Oh, I shall! I shall indeed!"

They traverse the long balcony in silence. The moon is flooding it with brilliant light. Here and there are groups in twos or threes—the twos are most popular. Just as they come to the entrance to the dancing-room, an alcove now deserted, Tita stops short and looks at him.

"You have promised to be kind to me!" says she, her voice trembling. For the first time the solemnity of this marriage arrangement of hers seems to have dawned upon her.

"I have," says Rylton earnestly.

"I am often very troublesome," says the poor child. "Uncle George says so. But you——" She hesitates, looking at him always. Her gaze is intense. He feels as if she is watching him, taking his mental temperature, as it were.

"Be kind to me in turn, Tita," says he. "Don't mistrust me. Try to *know* that I like you."

"I wish," says she, a little forlornly, "that you could be fond of me. I'm—you don't know it—nobody knows it—but I'm often very lonely. I've been lonely all the time since pappy died."

"You shall never be lonely again," says Rylton. "I'm your friend from this hour—your friend for ever." He is touched to his very heart by her words and her small face. He stoops over her, and in spite of all that has been said against kissing, presses his lips to her soft cheek!

"Ah! You are kind. I *do* like you," says she, gazing at him with earnest eyes. "Yes, I know I shall be happy with you." She is evidently comparing him most favourably with Uncle George. "And you will be fond of me, won't you? You will be good to me?"

"I will, so help me God!" says Rylton very solemnly.

To her it seems an oath of allegiance—kindly, tender, reassuring. To him it is a solemn abjuration of all his devotion to—the other.

CHAPTER X.

HOW MAURICE GIVES WAY TO TEMPER, AND HOW LADY RYLTON PLANTS A SHAFT OR TWO. AND HOW MARGARET SAYS A WORD IN SEASON, AND HOW IN RETURN COLONEL NEILSON SAYS A WORD TO HER.

Maurice goes straight to his mother's room, not from a sense of duty, but a desire to clinch the matter finally. Lady Rylton would be the last person to permit backsliding where her own interests were concerned, and perhaps— He does not exactly say it to himself in so many words, but he feels a certain dread of the moment when he shall be alone—a prey to thought. What if he should regret the move he had taken, to the extent of wanting it undone? His step grows quicker as he approaches his mother's room. His interview with her is of the slightest—a bare declaration of the fact. She would have fallen upon his neck in the exuberance of her triumph and her satisfaction, but he coldly repulses her.

"My dear mother, why such enthusiasm over my engagement to a girl of whom you distinctly disapprove?"

"Disapprove! Of Tita! Dearest Maurice, what an idea!"

"We won't go into it," says Maurice, with a gesture of ill-suppressed disgust. "I know your opinion of her. I beg to say, however, I do not share it. Badly as I shall come out of this transaction, I should like you to remember that I both admire and like Miss Bolton."

"I know, dearest boy, I know," says Lady Rylton, in the tone one would use to an acute sufferer. "It is very noble of you, Maurice. It is a sacrifice. I felt sometimes I had no right to demand——"

"The sacrifice is hers," says he shortly, gloomily.

His eyes are bent upon the ground.

"Hers! That little upst—— that poor unsophisticated child! My dear Maurice, why run away with things? Of course she was charmed, enchanted, *flattered*, in that you admired her so much as to ask her to be your wife."

"She was not," says Maurice flatly.

"Exactly what I should have expected from such a——" Lady Rylton checks herself in her fury. "From such an innocent creature," substitutes she. "But for all that, I shall consider how great is the sacrifice you have made, Maurice—how you have given up the happiness of your life to preserve the old name."

"I am beginning to get tired of the old name," says Maurice slowly. "Its nobility seems to me to be on the decline."

"Oh, not now," says Lady Rylton, who does not understand him, who could not, if she tried, fathom the depths of self-contempt that he endures, when he thinks of this evening's work, of his permitting this child to marry him, and give him her wealth—for nothing—nothing! What *can* he give her in return? An old name. She had not seemed to care for that—to know the importance of it. "Now it will rise again, and at all events, Maurice, you have saved the old home!"

"True!" says he. "For you."

"For *me*? Oh, dearest boy, what *can* you mean?"

"Yes, for you only. She refuses to live here with you."

The very disquietude of his soul has driven him into this mad avowal. Looking at her with dull eyes and lowering brows, he tells himself—in this, one of the saddest hours of his life—that he hates the mother who bore him. Her delight in his engagement is odious to him; it seems to fan his rage against her. What has she ever done for him, what sympathy has she ever shown? She has embittered the life of the woman he loves; she has insulted the woman he is to marry. What consideration does she deserve at his hands?

"She refuses to live here with *me*?" says Lady Rylton. "And why, may I ask?"

Her small, pale face flushes angrily.

"I don't know, really; you should be the one to know."

His tone is so cold, so uncompromising, that she decides on coming to terms for the present. Afterwards, when that girl has married him, she will remember to some purpose, so far as *she* is concerned. There is a little tale that she can tell her.

"Dearest Maurice, how could I? I always fancied I treated her with the utmost kindness. But why should we worry about it? No doubt it was a mere girlish fancy, a distaste," playfully, "to the terrible mamma-in-law of fiction. Such monsters do not exist now. She will learn that by degrees. You will bring her to stay with me for awhile on your return from your honeymoon?"

"If you desire it."

"Of course I shall desire it; then she and I will become great friends. You are going? My love to your little *fiancée*, and say I am so charmed, so delighted! And tell her I should like her to come to me for a quiet little talk in the morning about eleven; I shall have no one with me then but Marian."

"She shall not come to you, then," says Rylton. A dark red mounts to his brow. What a diabolical thought—to receive those two together! "Do you *hear*?" says he imperiously.

"Good heavens, yes!" says his mother, pretending prettily to cower before him. "What a tone! What a look! What have I done, then?"

"What devilish cruelty is in your heart I don't know," says he, his passion carrying him beyond all bounds; "but understand at once, I will not have Tita tortured."

Lady Rylton leans back in her chair and laughs.

"You would have made a good tragic actor," she says. "If this little plebeian throws you over after all, you should think of it. You remind me of your father when he was in his most amusing moods. There, go; kiss Tita for me." Rylton turns to the door, his very soul on fire with rage. Just as he goes out, she calls to him, with a little soft musical ripple of laughter. "By-the-bye, take care you do not kiss Marian instead," says she.

He meets Margaret on his way downstairs. He had walked up and down the passages above, in the dim light, with a view to bringing himself back into a state of control, with so much success that, when he comes face to face with Miss Knollys, he seems to her as self-possessed as usual. He had seen her talking to Tita in the hall below, in a somewhat earnest manner, and had taken it for granted that Tita had told her of their engagement.

"Well," says he, stopping her.

"Well?" returns she, smiling.

"You have heard?"

"Of what? Anything new?" curiously. The very best women are curious.

"Of my engagement; surely she has told you?"

"She? Who? *Marian!*"

"No—*no!*"

Then the truth comes to her.

"Tita?" she says faintly.

He nods his head; words fail him.

"She told me nothing," says Margaret, recovering herself.

"Yet I saw you talking together just now."

"You did indeed."

"And she said nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Then what *were* you talking about?"

"I was advising her to marry no man who did not love her."

"What an extraordinary piece of advice to give to a girl who, as far as you knew, was not going to be married at all! What led up to it?"

"Not Tita, certainly. It was I who led up to it."

"And why?"

"Do you think I have been blind and deaf, Maurice, during the past fortnight?" Miss Knollys almost compels his gaze. "If you are going to marry this young girl, *this child*, I hope, I"—almost passionately—"hope it will be for her good and yours."

"Margaret! What a tone! You mean something!"

"I do." Margaret's strong face lights up with honest anxiety. "I mean this!" She takes a step nearer him. "How is it between you and Marian?"

"Why, how has it been?" asks he, with affected lightness; but a change passes over his face.

"Oh, Maurice, take care!" says his cousin, laying her hand upon his arm.

"Well, if you must have it," says he, frowning, "all that is over."

He breaks away from her, frowning still.

It is quite plain to her that she has offended him. But even as he leaves her he looks back; a sort of grim smile illumines his face.

"I note that in your 'hoping' you have put Miss Bolton before me; that is as it should be. She is a sworn admirer of yours. Did you know it?"

"No. But she appeals to me—I don't know why—but I feel that I could love her," says Margaret, in short sentences as if thinking, and as if a little surprised at herself. Suddenly she breaks into a more immediate feeling. "Oh, Maurice, love her too! Try, *try* to love her; she is so young. Her very *soul* is in your keeping. Be good to her; she is a mere baby. If you neglect her, forget her——"

Maurice casts a queer look at her.

"Is thy servant a dog?" quotes he.

* * * * *

Margaret moves slowly away. She had, when Maurice met her, been bent on going upstairs to her books and her thoughts; but now she turns backward. She feels as if she wants something. Perhaps she finds it—unconsciously, however—when she stops before a tall, soldierly-looking man, who, seeing her, comes to meet her with evident pleasure.

"You look disturbed!" says Colonel Neilson.

He is, as I have said, a tall man, with a kindly face, and deep eyes of a dark colour. There is nothing very special about him; he is not, strictly speaking, handsome, yet he was, last season, one of the most popular men in town.

"Yes, and no," says Margaret. "My cousin has confided a sort of secret to me."

"A secret! I may not hear it, then?"

"Well, I don't know. It is, as I have hinted, a *sort* of secret, not very much to be kept."

"I may hear it, then?"

"I suppose so. At all events," with a laugh, soft and silk, "I should like you to hear it, because I want your opinion. You will give it?"

"You know I will give you everything I have," says he.

"Oh no! you must not talk like that," says she. "Put all that on one side, and let me have you for my friend. I want one now—not for myself, but for another; for two others, in fact. You know how fond I am of Maurice, and lately I have contracted quite a romantic, for *me*"—she pauses and laughs—"well, quite a romantic affection, for a little girl staying here with my aunt. You know who I mean—Tita Bolton."

"A charming child?"

"I am so glad you like her! But, as you say, she is a mere child; and Maurice has proposed to her, and she has accepted him, and I am curious about her future."

"Hers only?"

"Oh no! His, too!"

"It will be a risk, certainly," says Colonel Neilson. "I thought—I imagined—I had heard that Rylton was engaged to his cousin, Mrs. Bethune—a very beautiful woman."

"How can you think so!" says Margaret. "Well, yes, no doubt she *is* beautiful, but I should not like Maurice to marry her."

"You would prefer his marrying the 'charming child'?"

"I don't know what I prefer," says Miss Knollys. She casts a reproachful glance at him that certainly is not deserved. Has he not served her late and early for the past six years? "I thought you would help me!"

"You know I shall do that, however things may turn."

"Well, help me here. What *ought* Maurice to do? I am so dreadfully unhappy about this projected marriage of his."

"It seems to me you are unhappy about all things except those that concern yourself. Your own future seems a blank to you; is it not so?"

Miss Knollys makes a little movement.

"Why should it be always a blank?" says he. "Margaret," in a low tone, "let me fill it!"

Margaret rises impatiently.

"After all, you can't help me," says she, turning abruptly away.

"Margaret, hear me!"

"No, no, no! What is the use?"

She goes slowly down the hall.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE LAST DAY COMES, AND HOW SOME STRANGE WORDS ARE SAID BEFORE THE MARRIAGE IS ACCOMPLISHED; AND HOW MARION BETHUNE SCORES A POINT.

The dawn of the wedding-day has broken. Everything has been hurried over as much as possible; with no unseemly haste—just in the most ordinary, kindly way—however. But Lady Rylton's hand was at the helm, and she guided her barque to a safe anchor with all speed. She had kept Tita with her—under her eye, as it were—until the final accomplishment should have taken place.

The wedding, she declared, should be from her house, from The Place, seeing that the poor darling child was motherless! She made herself all things to Tita in those days, although great anger stung her within. She had been bitterly incensed by Maurice's avowal that Tita had declined to live with her at The Place, but she had been mightily pleased, for all that, in the thought that therefore The Place would be left to her without a division of authority.

Sir Maurice has gone to Rickfort to interview "Uncle George" of unpleasant fame. He had found him a rather strange-looking man, but not so impossible as Tita had led him to imagine. He made no objection of any sort to the marriage, and, indeed, through his cold exterior Maurice could see that the merchant blood in him was flattered at his niece's alliance with some of the oldest blood in England.

He was quite reasonable, too, about his niece's fortune. So much was to go to redeeming the more immediate debts on the property; for the rest, Sir Maurice declared he would have nothing to do with it. The money should be settled on his wife entirely. It was hers; he had no claim to it. He would have something off his own property, a small thing, but sufficient for his requirements. He gave his word to quit the turf finally. He had no desire to amuse himself in that sort of way again—or, indeed, in other ways. He wished to settle down, etc. It occurred to old Bolton, who was a shrewd man, that Sir Maurice looked like one whose interest in life and its joys was at an end. Still, he was a baronet, and of very ancient lineage, and it was a triumph for the Boltons. He refused to acknowledge to *himself* that he was sacrificing his niece. It was not a sacrifice; it was an honour!

For one thing the old man stipulated, or rather bargained. He had managed his niece's affairs so far with great success; some of her money was in land, in Oakdean and Rickfort, for example; the rest he had invested securely, as he hoped and believed. If he might still be acknowledged as her guardian?

Sir Maurice, of course, gave in. Thoroughly ashamed and humiliated by the whole affair—he, the man, without a penny; she, the woman, possessed of all things in that line—it gave him genuine relief to tell her uncle that he would be actually thankful if he would still continue to be the head of her affairs, and manage her money matters, as he had managed them hitherto—and always with such happy results.

Mr. Bolton had bowed to him over his spectacles; his curious gray eyes caught a little addition of light, as it were. He was honoured by Sir Maurice's confidence, but, if he might suggest it, he thought that whilst Sir Maurice's affairs were righting themselves, he ought to allow himself a certain income out of his wife's money.

But Rylton would not hear of it. He had, as he had already told Mr. Bolton, a small yearly income that he might with honesty call his own. It was specially small on account of his mother's jointure having to be paid out of the estate also. Of course he could not curtail that, nor would he desire to do so. And, seeing how deeply dipped the estates were, he could, of course, only take as much as he could reasonably desire. With his future wife's help, however, he felt the old property could be brought back in time to its former splendid position—to a position that he would be proud to see her the mistress of, etc.

There is always a good deal of humbug talked on these occasions. Maurice, perhaps, talked very considerably less than most people; and, indeed, when he said he would gladly see her mistress of all he ought to have, he spoke something very near the truth. He was grateful to her beyond all words, and he had sworn to himself to be loyal to her.

Lady Rylton was distinctly annoyed when she heard of the arrangements come to. She would have liked Maurice to have had entire control of his wife's fortune. And, oddly enough, Tita was annoyed too.

"Oh, I *wish* you had broken away entirely from Uncle George," she had said to Maurice, when he had come down on one of his flying visits to The Place between his engagement and his marriage.

"But why? He seemed to me quite a nice old gentleman."

She could not explain why, however, but only clung to her belief that they would be better without Uncle George. She hated him. That seemed to be the sum total of her objection.

Maurice had left The Place the morning after his engagement. He had had time to have an interview with his little *fiancée*, who seemed surprised that he wanted it in private, and who, to his great relief, insisted on making very cool adieux to him in the public hall, where everyone was passing to and fro,

and where Mr. Gower was making a nuisance of himself by playing ball against the library door. Naturally it was impossible to have an affecting parting there.

Marian had not come down to breakfast. And Sir Maurice was conscious of a passionate sense of relief. She had heard. He knew—he felt that! His mother would not spare her; and even if she had not cared as *he* had cared, still, unless she was the greatest fiend on earth, she must have had some small love for him—how *terribly* small he knows! He assures himself of that all day long in the living torture he is enduring, as if by it he can reconcile himself to his marriage with this child, whose money is so hateful, and whose presence is such a bore.

There are a few things, however, always to be thankful for. Tita, in the frankest fashion in all their interviews, has told him that she doesn't care a fig about him, that she was marrying him *only* to escape from Uncle George!

All their interviews have been but few. Sir Maurice had run down from here, and there, and everywhere, just for a night at a time, arriving barely in time for dinner, and going away before breakfast. Once, and once only, he had seen Mrs. Bethune. Those other times she had been confined to her room with neuralgia (what should we all do without neuralgia?), or with letters to write, or something, *_any_thing* else.

That one time she came out of the library at the very moment he had arrived. They met in the hall, and it was quite impossible to avoid seeing him. She came forward with a charming air.

"Is it you? How long since we have met!" said she. Her tone was evenness itself; she was smiling brightly. If she was pale, he could not see it in the darkening twilight. "How troublesome these elections are! I see you have been staying with the Montgomerys; I do hope he will get in. But Conservatives are nowhere nowadays. Truth lies buried in a well. That's a good old saying." She nodded to him and went up a step or two of the stairs, then looked back. "Don't stay away from The Place on my account," said she, with rather an amused smile. "I like to have you here. And see how badly you are behaving to the beloved one!"

She smiled again, with even more amusement than before, and continued her graceful way up the stairs. He had turned away sore at heart. She had not even thought it worth her while to make an appeal to him. If she had! He told himself that even then, if she had said but one word, he would have thrown up everything, even his *honour*, and gone with her to the ends of the earth. But she had not said that word—she had not cared—*sufficiently*.

* * * *

And now it is indeed all over! They have come back from the church—Tita just as she is every day, without a cloud on her brow, and laughing with everybody, and telling everybody, without the least disguise, that she is so *glad* she is married, because now Uncle George can never claim her again. She seems to have no thought but this. She treats her newly-made husband in a merry, perfectly unembarrassed, rather *boyish* style, and is, in effect, quite delighted with her new move.

Sir Maurice has gone through it all without a flaw. At the breakfast he had made quite a finished little speech (he could never have told you afterwards what it was about), and when the bride was upstairs changing her wedding garments he had gone about amongst his guests with an air that left nothing to be desired. He looks quite an ideal bridegroom. A mad longing for solitude drags him presently, however, into a small anteroom, opening off a larger room beyond. The carriage that is to convey him to the station is at the door, and he almost swears at the delay that arises from Tita's non-appearance.

Yet here—here is rest. Here there is no one to breathe detestable congratulations into his ear—*no* one.

A tall, slight figure rises from a couch that is half hidden by a Chinese screen. She comes forward a step or two. Her face is pale. It is Marian Bethune.

"You!" says she in a low, strange voice. "Have *_you_* come here, too, to *think?*" She speaks with difficulty. Then all at once she makes a stray movement with her hands, and brings herself to her senses by a passionate effort. "You are like me, you want quiet," says she, with a very ordinary little laugh; "so you came here. Well, shall I leave you?"

She is looking very beautiful. Her pallor, the violet shades beneath her eyes, all tend to make her

lovely.

"It is you who have left me."

"I? Oh no! Oh, think!" says she, laughing still.

Rylton draws a long breath.

"After all, it could never have come to anything," says he, in a dull sort of way.

"Never, never," smiling.

"I don't believe you care," says he bitterly.

She looks at him. It is a curious look.

"Why should I? Do *you* care?"

He turns away.

"Don't let us part bad friends," says she, going to him, and twining one of her hands round his arm. "What have I done to you, or you to me? How have we been enemies? It is fate, it is poverty that has been our common enemy, Maurice, remember what we *have* been to each other."

"It is what I dare not remember," says he hoarsely.

His face is resolutely turned from hers.

"Well, well, forget, then, *if you can*. As for me, remembrance will be my sole joy."

"It is madness, Marian, to talk to me like this. What is to be gained by it?"

"Why, nothing, nothing, and so let us forget; let us begin again as true friends only."

"There is no hope of that," says he.

His voice is a mere whisper.

"Oh yes, there is—there," eagerly, "*must* be. What! Would you throw me over altogether, Maurice? Oh, that I *could* not bear! Why should we not be as brother and sister to each other? Yes, yes," vehemently; "tell me it shall be so. You will ask me to your new house, Maurice, won't you?"

She is looking up into his face, her hand still pressing his arm.

"My wife's house."

"Your wife's house is yours, is it not? You owe yourself something from this marriage. You will ask me there now and then?"

"She will ask her own guests, I suppose."

"She will ask whom *you* choose. Pah! what is she but a child in your hands?"

"Tita is not the cipher you describe her," says Rylton coldly.

"No, no; I spoke wrongly—I am always wrong, it seems to me," says she, with such sweet contrition that she disarms him again. "I cannot live if I cannot see you sometimes, and, besides, you *know* what my life is here, and how few are the houses I can go to, and"—she slips her arms suddenly round his neck—"you *will* ask me sometimes, Maurice?"

"Yes."

"You promise that?"

"I promise that, as far as it lies in my power, I will always befriend you."

"Ah, that is not enough," says she, laughing and sobbing in the same breath. "I am losing you for ever. Give me something to dwell upon, to hope for. Swear you will make me your guest sometimes."

"I swear it," says he huskily.

He removes her arms from his neck, and holds her from him. His face is gray.

"It is for the sake of our old *friendship* that I plead," says she.

The tears are running down her cheeks.

"Our friendship," repeats he, with a groan.

He makes a movement as if to fling her from him, then suddenly catches her to his heart, and presses his lips passionately to hers.

* * * * *

"Maurice! Maurice!" calls somebody.

Marian sinks upon a couch near her, and buries her face in her hands. Sir Maurice goes into the hall to meet his bride.

The partings are very brief. Tita, who is in the gayest spirits, says good-bye to everybody with a light heart. Has not her freedom been accomplished? She receives Lady Rylton's effusive embrace calmly. There are some, indeed, who say that the little bride did not return her kiss. Just at the very last, with her foot almost on the carriage step, Tita looks back, and seeing Margaret at a little distance, runs to her, and flings herself into her embrace.

"You are mine now, my own cousin!" whispers she joyfully.

"God bless you, Tita," says Margaret in a whisper, too, but very earnestly, "and preserve to you your happy heart!"

"Oh, I shall always be happy," says Tita; "and I shall hurry back to see *you*," giving her another hug.

Then somebody puts her into the carriage, and, still smiling and waving her hands, she is driven away.

"Really, Margaret, you should be flattered," says Lady Rylton, with a sneer. "She seems to think more of you than of her husband."

"I hope her husband will think of her," returns Margaret coldly. "As I told you before, I consider this marriage ill done."

CHAPTER XII.

HOW TITA COMES BACK FROM HER HONEYMOON, AND HOW HER HUSBAND'S MOTHER TELLS HER OF CERTAIN THINGS THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT UNTOLD.

"And the weather—the weather was the most marvellous thing!" says Tita, with enthusiasm. "Perpetual sunshine! Here, in September, it often pelts rain all day long!"

"*Pelts!* My dear Tita, *what* a word!" says Lady Rylton.

She sinks back in her chair as if overcome, and presses her perfumed handkerchief to her face.

"What's the matter with it?" asks Tita, a little smartly, perhaps. "It's a right-down good word, in my opinion. I've heard lots of people use it."

"No doubt *you* have," says her mother-in-law.

"Well, so have you, I dare say!" says Tita.

"I expect we all have," says Margaret Knollys, laughing. "Still, you know, Tita, it's not a pretty word."

"Very good; I shan't say it again," says Tita, the mutinous little face of a moment ago now lovely with love.

She has come back from her honeymoon quite as fond of Margaret as when she started.

It is now the middle of September; outside on the lawn the shadows are wandering merrily from tree

to tree. The sun is high, but little clouds running across it now and again speak of sharp rains to come.

"The air so soft, the pines whispering so low,
The dragon-flies, like fairy spears of steel,
Darting or poised."

All these speak of the glad heat that still remains, though summer itself is but a dream that is gone.

Tita's honeymoon is at an end. It had seemed to her delightful. She had taken but a child's view of it. Maurice had been so kind, so good, so different from that nasty old uncle. He had been so good, indeed, that when he asked her to come first to see his mother (Lady Rylton had made quite a point of this in her letters to him; the county might think it so odd if the young wife did not appear anxious to fly into her arms on her return), she had said "Yes" quite willingly, and with a grateful little glance. He had done so much for her, she must do something for him. But she hated going back to The Place, for all that. She wanted to go straight to her own old home, her beautiful Oakdean, without a single stop.

She has been at The Place now for a week. Margaret Knollys and Randal Gower are the only two guests, Mrs. Bethune being on a visit to some friends in Scotland. The shooting here is excellent, and Sir Maurice has enjoyed himself immensely. Sir Maurice's wife has, perhaps, not enjoyed herself quite so much. But nothing, so far, has occurred to render her in the very least unhappy. If the clouds be black, she has not seen them. Her young soul has uplifted itself, and is soaring gaily amongst the stars. In her ignorance she tells herself she is quite, quite happy; it is only when we love that we doubt of happiness, and thus sometimes (because of our modesty, perhaps) we gain it. Tita has never known what love means.

There has been a little fret, a little jar to-day, between her and Lady Rylton. The latter's memory is good, and she has never forgotten what Maurice—in a moment's folly—had said of Tita's determination not to live with her at The Place. It is Lady Rylton's *rôle* to return to all, in extra good measure, such injuries as she may judge herself to have received.

Tita naturally, in this small warfare, is at a disadvantage. She has forgotten her words, but even if she remembered them, would not for a moment suspect Maurice of having repeated them. And, indeed, Maurice, as we all know, had done it in a heated moment with best intent towards his small betrothed; besides, Tita at this time—so heartwhole and so *débonnaire*—gives no thinking to anything save the getting out into the fresh air in these uncertain days, and the breaking in of a young horse that Maurice has made her a present of. Danger walks behind her, but she never turns her head; what has she to fear?

"Youth, that knows no dread
Of any horrors lurking far ahead,
Across the sunny flowered fields of life."

carries her safely right into the enemy's camp. Cruel youth!

"Won't you come out with me and have a stroll in the gardens before tea?" asks Margaret, rising. It seems to her that the social air is growing a little too sultry. "Come, Tita; it will do you good."

"Oh, I should love it!" says Tita, starting to her feet.

"Dear Margaret, you forget that, though Tita has been here for a week, this is the very first quiet moment I have had with her! Do not tempt her from me!"

"Certainly not, Tessie, if you wish to have her with you," says Margaret, reseating herself.

Now, more than ever, she feels there is danger in the air.

"Don't let me keep *you*," says Lady Rylton, with deliberation. "Go, dear Margaret, and get some of the sweet evening air—it may be of use to your complexion; it is the tiniest bit yellow of late. And when one is twenty-five—it *is* twenty-five?"

She knows Margaret's truthful nature.

"Thirty," says Margaret, who knows her, too, to the very ground.

"Ah, impossible!" says Lady Rylton sweetly. "Twenty-five, Margaret—not a day more! But, still, your complexion— There, go away and refresh it; and come back when I have had my little chat with my dearest Tita."

Margaret casts a swift glance at the girl sitting there, apparently quite unconscious of the coming storm, and with her hands twined behind her head. She has her legs crossed—another sin—and is waving one little foot up and down in a rather too careless fashion.

Tita looks back at her.

"Don't be long," says she inaudibly.

Margaret gives her a nod, and goes out through the window.

"My dearest child," says Lady Rylton, nestling cosily into her chair, and smiling delicately at Tita over the top of her fan, "you may have noticed that I gave dear Margaret her *congé* with intent?"

"I saw that you wanted to get rid of her," says Tita.

"I fear, my dear, your training has been somewhat defective," says Lady Rylton, biting her lips. "We never—we in society, I mean—never 'get rid' of people. There are better ways of doing things, that——"

"It must cause you a lot of trouble," says Tita. "It looks to me like walking half a dozen times round your bath on a frosty morning, knowing all along you will have to get into it."

"Sh!" says Lady Rylton. "My dear, you should not mention your *bath* before people."

"Why not? When one loves a thing, one speaks of it. Don't *you* love your bath?" asks Tita.

Lady Rylton sits glaring at her, as if too horrified to go on. Tita continues:

"If you don't, you ought, you know," says she.

"You must be out of your mind to talk to me like this," says Lady Rylton at last. Something in the girl's air tells her that there is some little touch of devilment in it, some anger, some hatred. "But, naturally, I make allowances for you. Your birth, your surroundings, your bringing up, all preclude the idea that you should know how to manage yourself in the world into which you have been thrown by your marriage with my son."

"As for my birth," says Tita slowly, "I did not choose it; and you should be the last to throw it in my teeth. If you disapproved of it *before* my marriage with your son, why did you not say so?"

"There were many reasons," says Lady Rylton slowly, deliberately. "For one, as you know, your money was a necessity to Maurice; and for another——" She breaks off, and scans the girl's face with an air of question. "Dare I go on?" asks she.

"Why should you not dare?" says Tita.

A quick light has come into her eyes.

"Ah, that is it! I have something to say to you that I think, perhaps, should be said, yet I fear the saying of it."

"For you, or for me?" asks Tita.

She has her small brown hands clasped tightly together in her lap now. There is something nervous in the tension of them. Where, *where* is Margaret? For all that, she looks back at her mother-in-law with a clear and fearless glance.

"For you," says Lady Rylton—"for you only! But before I begin—I am a very nervous person, you know, and scenes," again pressing her handkerchief to her face, "upset me so—tell me, *do* tell me, if you have a good temper!"

"I don't know," says Tita. "Why?"

"Well, a reasonable temper! I know Maurice would try anything—*less* than that."

"Has it to do with Maurice? Yes? I am *very* reasonable," says Tita, laughing. She shows all her pretty teeth. "Now for the other reason for deigning to accept me as your son's wife!"

She laughs again. She seems to turn Lady Rylton into a sort of mild ridicule.

"I don't think I should laugh about it if I were *you*," returns Lady Rylton calmly, and with the subdued air that tells her intimates when she is in one of her vilest moods. "I feel very sorry for you, my poor child; and I would have warned you of this thing long ago, but I dreaded the anger of Maurice."

"Why, what *is* it?" cries Tita vehemently. "Has Maurice murdered somebody, or defrauded somebody, or run away with somebody?"

"Oh no! He did not run *away* with her," says lady Rylton slowly.

"You mean—you mean——"

The girl is now leaning forward, her small face rather white.

"I mean that he has been in love with his cousin for the past two years."

"His cousin!" Tita's thoughts run to Margaret. "Margaret?"

"Nonsense!" says Lady Rylton; the idea strikes her as ludicrous. The surprise, the strange awakening to the young bride, who, if not in love with her husband, has at all events expected loyalty from him, has affected her not at all; but this suggestion of Margaret as a possible lover of Maurice's convulses her with amusement. "Margaret! *No!*"

"Who, then?" asks Tita.

"Marian—Marian Bethune."

"Mrs. Bethune!"

"Did you never guess? I fancied perhaps you had heard nothing, so I felt it my duty to let you into a *little* of the secret—to *warn* you. Marian might want to stay with you, for example—and Maurice——"

"Mrs. Bethune may stay with me with pleasure," says Tita. "Why not?"

"Why *not?*" Lady Rylton pauses as if choking. She had thought to lower this girl into the very dust, and revenge herself on Maurice at the same time by her shameful revelation. "You do not care, then?" says she, bitterly disappointed.

Tita does not answer her. Suddenly her young thoughts have gone backwards, and all at once she remembers many things. The poison has entered into her. In a moment, as it were, she is back in that dim conservatory where Maurice (he has never been "he" or "him" to her, as happier girls, who love more and are more beloved, would have styled him)—where Maurice had asked her to marry him.

Now, in some strange fashion, her memory grows alive and compels her to remember how he looked and spoke that night—that night of his proposal to her, when she had asked him if he loved his cousin.

There had been a queer, indescribable change in his face—a sudden pallor, a start! She had thought nothing of it then, but now it comes back to her. She *had* meant Margaret—Margaret whom she loves; but he—who had *he* meant?

Really it doesn't matter so much after all, this story of Lady Rylton's. Maurice can go his way and she hers—that was arranged! But, for all that, it *does* seem rather mean that he should have married her, telling her nothing of this.

"Care! why should I care?" says she suddenly, Lady Rylton's last words clinging to her brain, in spite of all its swift wanderings during the last sixty seconds.

"Such an admirable indifference would almost lead me to believe that you had been born of good parentage," says Lady Rylton, cold with disappointed revenge.

"I was born of excellent parentage——" Tita is beginning, when the sound of footsteps slowly mounting the stairs of the veranda outside comes to them.

A second later Mrs. Gower shows himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW A YOUNG AND LOVELY NATURE TAKES A SHOCK MOST CRUELLY ADMINISTERED. AND HOW A DOWAGER TAKES A NEW NAME AS A DIRECT INSULT. AND HOW TITA DECLINES TO PROMISE ANYTHING.

He stands at the open window looking in. All at once Tita knows and *feels* that Margaret sent him to

rescue her from captivity.

"Lady Rylton," calls he, "won't you come out? The evening is a perfect dream—a boon and a blessing to men, like those pens, you know."

The elder Lady Rylton answers him. She leans forward, a charming smile on her wonderfully youthful features.

"No. No, thanks." She shakes her pretty, fair head at Gower in a delightfully coquettish fashion. Dear boy! How sweet is it of him to come and fetch her for a little stroll among the hollyhocks. "I can't go out now. Not *to-night*, Randal!"

"Oh! er—so sorry! But——" He looks at Tita. It is impossible not to understand that the Lady Rylton he had intended to take for a little stroll in the calm, delightful evening, had been the younger Lady Rylton. "Well, if your—er—mother—won't come, won't *you?*" asks he, now addressing Tita distinctly.

"I am not going out either," says she, smiling gently at him. To go now will be to betray fear, and she—no, she will not give in, any way, she will never show the white feather. She will finish this hour with Lady Rylton, whatever it may cost her.

"Really?" asks Gower. He looks as if he would have persuaded her to come with him, but something in her manner convinces him of the folly of persistence.

"Yes, really," returns she, after which he goes down the steps again. They can hear him going, slowly this time, as if reluctantly, and step by step. There doesn't seem to be a run left in him.

"How absurd it is, this confusion of titles!" says Lady Rylton, as the last unsatisfactory step is lost to them in the distance. "Lady Rylton here and Lady Rylton there. Absurd, *I* call it." She makes a pretence at laughter, but it is a sorry one—her laugh is only angry.

"I suppose it can't be helped," says Tita indifferently. Her eyes are still downcast, her young mouth a little scornful.

"But if you are to be Lady Rylton as well as I, how are we to distinguish? What am *I* to be?"

"The dowager, I suppose," says Tita, with a little flash of malice. She has been rubbed the wrong way a trifle too much for *one* afternoon.

"*The dowager!*" Lady Rylton springs to her feet. "I—do you think that *I* shall follow *you* out of a room?"

"Follow me! I'd hate you to follow me anywhere!" says Tita, who does not certainly follow her as to her meaning.

"That is meant to be a smart speech, I presume," says Lady Rylton, sinking back into her seat once more. "But do not for a moment imagine that I dread you. You know very little of Society if you think you will be tolerated *there*."

"I know nothing of Society," returns Tita, now very pale, "and perhaps you will understand me when I say that I never want to know anything. If Society means people who tell hateful, unkind stories of a husband to his wife, I think I am very well out of it."

"That is a little censure upon poor me, I suppose," says Lady Rylton with a difficult smile. She looks at Tita. Evidently she expects Tita to sink into the ground beneath that austere regard, but Tita comes up smiling.

"Well, yes. After all, I suppose so," says she slowly, thoughtfully. "You shouldn't have told me that story about Maurice and—" She stops.

"I shall not permit you to dictate to me what I should or should not do," interrupts Lady Rylton coldly. "You forget yourself! You forget what is due to the head of the house."

"I do not, indeed; Maurice will tell you so!"

"Maurice! What has he to do with it?"

"Why, he *is* the head," slowly.

"True, you are right so far," says Lady Rylton bitterly. "But I was not alluding to the *actual* head; I was alluding to the—the *mistress* of this house." She pauses, and looks with open hatred at the little

girl before her. Tita could have answered her, have told her that her authority was at an end for ever, but by a violent effort she restrains herself. Tita's naturally warm temper is now at boiling-point. Still, she puts a restraint upon herself.

"You will understand for the future, I hope," says Lady Rylton, who has lost all control over *her* temper; "you will, for the future, at all events, I trust, bear yourself with respect towards the mistress of this house."

Her manner is so insolent, so unbearable, that Tita's short-lived calm gives way.

"Maurice says I am the mistress here," says she distinctly, clearly.

"You! *you*——" Lady Rylton advances towards her with a movement that is almost threatening.

"Don't be uneasy about it," says Tita, with a scornful little laugh, and a gesture that destroys the meaning of Lady Rylton's. "I don't want to be the mistress here. I dislike the place. I shall be delighted if you will live here—*instead of me.*"

"You are too good!" says Lady Rylton, in a choking tone. She looks as if she could kill this girl, whom she has driven to so fierce an anger.

"I think it dismal," goes on Tita. "I like light and gay places." There is a little clutch at her heart, though why, she hardly knows. What she *does* know is that she hates this pretty, fair, patrician woman before her—this woman with a well-bred face, and the vulgarest of all vulgar natures. This woman who has betrayed her son's secret. Even to so young a girl, and one who is not in love with her husband, the idea of the husband being in love with somebody else is distinctly distasteful.

"Besides, remember," says Tita, "Mrs. Bethune lives here. After all you have told me of her, and—Maurice—you," breaking into a gay little laugh, "could hardly expect me to make this place my home."

"You certainly seem to take it very lightly," says Lady Rylton. "Maurice must be congratulated on having secured so *compliant* a wife."

"Why should I care?" asks Tita, turning a bright face to her. "We made a bargain before our marriage—Maurice and I. He was to do as he liked."

"And you?"

"I was to follow suit."

"*Outrageous!*" says Lady Rylton. "I shall speak to Maurice about it. I shall warn you. I shall tell him how I disapprove of you, and he——"

"He will do nothing," interrupts Tita. She stands up, and looks at the older woman as if defying her. Her small face is all alight, her eyes are burning.

"I dare say not, after all," says Lady Rylton, with a cruel smile. "He knew what he was about when he made that arrangement. It leaves him delightfully free to renew his love-affair with Marian Bethune."

"If he desires such freedom it is his." Tita gathers up her fan, and the long *suède* gloves lying on the chair near her, and walks towards the door.

"Stay, Tita!" cries Lady Rylton hurriedly. "You will say nothing of this to Maurice. It was in strict confidence I spoke, and for your good and his. You will say nothing to him?"

"I! what should I say?" She looks back at Lady Rylton, superb disdain in her glance.

"You might mention, for example, that it was I who told you."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" asked Tita. "Are you ashamed of what you have said?"

"I have always told you that I spoke only through a sense of duty, to protect you and him in your married life. You will give me your word that you will not betray me."

"I shall give you my word about nothing," coldly. "I shall tell Maurice, or I shall not tell him, just as it suits me."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW TITA COMES TO OAKDEAN, AND IS GLAD. AND HOW MAURICE CALLS TO HER, AND SHE PERFORMS AN AEROBATIC FEAT. AND HOW A DISCUSSION ARISES.

What a day it is! Golden light everywhere; and the sounds of singing birds, and the perfume of the late mignonette and stocks. Who shall say summer is gone? Tita, flitting gaily through the gardens and pleasure-grounds of her old dear home, her beloved Oakdean, tells herself that it is summer _here_ at all events, whatever it may be in other stupid homes.

Oakdean to-day is at its best, and that is saying a great deal. The grand old lawn, studded here and there with giant beeches, seems sleeping solemnly in the warm light, and to their left the lake lies, sleeping too, rocking upon its breast the lily leaves, whose flowers are now all gone. Over there the hills are purple with flowering heather, and beyond them, yet not so far away but that the soft murmuring of it can be heard, dwells the sea, spreading itself out, grand, immense, until it seems to touch the pale blue heavens.

Tita, stopping with her hands full of lowers, stands upright, and as a little breeze comes to her, draws in a long breath, as if catching the salt from the great ocean that it brings her. Oh, what a day—what a day!

Her lovely old home! Here she is in it once more—parted for ever from the detested uncle, mistress of this one place that holds for her the only happy memories of her youth. Here she and her father had lived—she a young, _young_ child, and he an old one—a most happy couple; and here, too, she had grown to girlhood. And now here she is again, free to roam, to order, to direct, with no single hitch anywhere to mar her happiness.

The lovely new horse that Maurice has got for her leaves nothing to be desired; she has had a gallop on him this morning. And all her dear dogs have been sent to Oakdean, so that her hands are full of favourites. As for Maurice himself, he is delightful. He doesn't even *know* how to scold. And it will always be like this—always. As for that story of Lady Rylton's about Marian Bethune—why, Marian is quite an old thing! And besides—well, besides, it doesn't matter. Maurice is here now, and he can't see her, and even if he did—well, even if he did, what harm? Neither she nor Maurice even _pretends_ to be in love with the other, and if he should be in love—as the idiots call it—with Mrs. Bethune, why, he *can* be! *She* won't prevent it, only she hopes poor Maurice won't make himself unhappy over that dreadful red-headed creature. But there is certainly one thing; he might have told her.

But what does anything matter? Here she is in her old home, with all her dear delights around her! She glances backwards and forwards, a happy smile upon her lips. From one of the Scotch firs over there, the graceful blossoms of the hop-plant droop prettily. And beyond them on the hillside, far, far away, she can see mushrooms gleaming in the fields, for all the world like little sheep dotted here and there. She laughs to herself as she notes the resemblance. And all is hers—all. And she is in her own home, and happy.

What a blessing she hadn't said "No" when Maurice asked her. If she had, she would have been living at Rickfort now with Uncle George.

"Tita!" cries Maurice.

He has thrown up the window of his smoking-room, and is calling to her.

"Yes?"

She turns to him, her arms full of flowers, her vivacious little face, just like another sort of flower, peeping over them.

"Can you come in for a moment?"

"Why can't you come out? *Do*, it is lovely here!"

"I can if you like, but it will mean hauling out pencils and paper, and——"

"Oh well, I'll come."

She runs to him across the green, sweet grass, and, standing beneath the window, holds out her hands to him.

"You can't come in this way," says he.

"Can't I? I wish I had a penny for every time I *did* get in this way," says she. "Here, give me your

hands."

He stoops to her, and catches her small brown hands in a close grip. The new Lady Rylton plants a very shapely little foot against an excrescence in the wall, and in a second has her knee on the window-sill.

"After all, my mother was right," says Rylton, laughing. "You are a hoyden."

He takes the slight girlish figure in his arms, and swings her into the room. She stands for a second looking at him with a rather thoughtful air. Then—

"You mother may call me names if she likes," says she. "But *you* mustn't!"

"No?" laughing again. She amuses him with her little air of authority. "Very good. I shan't! I suppose I may call you wife, any way."

"Oh, that!" She stops. "Did you bring me in to ask me that question?"

At this they laugh together.

"No. I confess so much."

"What, then?"

"Well, we ought to decide at once who we are going to ask for the rest of the shooting. The preserves are splendid, and it seems quite a sin to let them go to waste. Of course I know a lot of men I could ask, but there should be a few women, too, for you."

"Why for me? I like men a great deal better," says Tita audaciously.

"Well, you shouldn't! And, besides, you have some friends of your won to be asked."

"Your friends will do very well."

"Nonsense!" with a touch of impatience. "It is you and *your* friends who are first to be considered; afterwards we can think of mine."

"I have no friends," says Tita carelessly.

"You have your uncle, at all events; he might like——"

"Oh, don't be an ass," says Lady Rylton.

She delivers this excellent advice with a promptitude and vigour that does her honour. Rylton stares at her for a moment, and then gives way to amusement.

"I shan't be if I can help it," says he; "but there are often so many difficulties in the way." He hesitates as if uncertain, and then goes on. "By the way, Tita, you shouldn't give yourself the habit of saying things like that."

"Like what?"

"Well, telling a fellow not to be an ass, you know. It doesn't matter to me, of course, but I heard you say something like that to old Lady Warbeck yesterday, and she seemed quite startled."

"Did she? Do her good!" says Tita, making a charming little face at him. "Nothing like electricity nowadays. It'll quite set her up again. Add *years* to her life."

"Still, she wouldn't like it, perhaps."

"Having years added to her life?"

"No; your slang."

"She likes *me*, any way," says Tita nonchalantly, "so it doesn't matter about the slang. The last word she mumbled at me through her old false teeth was that she hoped I'd come over and see her every Tuesday that I had at my command (I'm not going to have *many*), because I reminded her of some granddaughter who was now in heaven, or at the Antipodes—it's all the same."

She pauses to catch a fly—dexterously, and with amazing swiftness, in the palm of her hand—that has been buzzing aimlessly against the window-pane. Having looked at it between her fingers, she flings it into the warm air outside.

"So you see," continues she triumphantly, "it's a good thing to startle people. They fall in love with you at once."

Here, as if some gay little thought has occurred to her, she lowers her head and looks at her dainty finger-nails, then up at Rylton from under half-closed lids.

"What a good thing I didn't try to startle *you!*" says she. "*You* might have fallen in love with me, too."

She waits for a second as it were, just time enough to let her see the nervous movement of his brows, and then—she laughs.

"I've escaped that bore," says she, nodding her head. She throws herself into a big chair. "And now, as the parsons say, 'to continue'; you were advising me to ask——"

"Your uncle."

All the brightness has died out of Rylton's voice; he looks dull, uninterested. That small remark of hers—what memories it has awakened! And yet—*would* he go back?

"Chut! What a suggestion!" says Tita, shrugging her shoulders. "Don't you know that my one thought is to enjoy myself?"

"A great one," says he, smiling strangely.

She cares for nothing, he tells himself: *nothing!* He has married a mere butterfly; yet how pretty the butterfly is, lying back there in that huge armchair, her picturesque little figure flung carelessly into artistic curves, her soft, velvety head rubbing itself restlessly amongst the amber cushions. The cushions had been in one of the drawing-rooms, but she had declared he was frightfully uncomfortable in his horrid old den, and has insisted on making him a handsome present of them. She seems to him the very incarnation of exquisite idleness, the idleness that knows no thought.

"Very good," says he at last. "If you refuse to make up a list of *your* friends, help me to make up a list of mine. You know you said you would like to fill the house."

"Ye—es," says she, as if meditating.

"Of course, if you don't want any people here——"

"But I do. I do really. I *hate* being alone!" cries she, springing into sudden life and leaning forward with her hands clasped on her knees.

"How few rings you have!" says he suddenly.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW TITA TELLS OF TWO STRANGE DREAMS, AND OF HOW THEY MOVED HER. AND HOW MAURICE SETS HIS SOUL ON ASKING A GUEST TO OAKDEAN; AND HOW HE GAINS HIS DESIRE.

"Not one, except this," touching her engagement ring. "That you have given me."

"You don't care for them, then?"

"Yes I do. I love them, but there was nobody to give them to me. I was very young, you see, when poor daddy died."

She stops; her mouth takes a mournful curve; the large gray eyes look with a sort of intensity through the windows to something—*something* beyond—but something that Rylton cannot see. After all, *is* she so trivial? She cares, at all events, for the memory of that dead father. Rylton regards her with interest.

"*He* would have given me rings," she says.

It is so childish, so absurd, that Rylton wonders why he doesn't want to laugh. But the little sad face, with the gray eyes filled with tears, checks any mirth he might have felt. A sudden longing to give her another ring, when next he goes to town, fills his heart.

"Well! what about our guests?"

Her tone startles him. He looks up. All the tears, the grief are gone; she is the gay, laughing Tita that

he *thinks* he knows.

"Well, what?" His tone is a little cold. She *is* superficial, certainly. "If you decline to ask your friends —"

"I don't decline. It is only that I *have* no friends," declares she.

There is something too deliberate in her manner to be quite natural, and Rylton looks at her. She returns his glance with something of mockery in hers.

"It isn't nice to be married to a mere nobody, is it?" says she, showing her pretty teeth in a rather malicious little laugh.

"I suppose not," says Rylton steadily. "I haven't tried it."

A gleam—a tiny gleam of pleasure comes into her eyes, but she wilfully repulses it.

"Oh, you—if anybody. However, you knew *before* you married me, that is one comfort."

"Why do you speak to me like that, Tita?" A frown has settled on Rylton's forehead. It is all such abominably bad form. "You know how—how—"

"Ill-bred it is," supplies she quietly, gaily.

"It is intolerable," vehemently, turning away and walking towards the door.

"Ah, come back! Don't go—don't go!" cries she eagerly. She jumps out of her big chair and runs after him. She slips her hand through his arm, and swinging her little *svelte* body round, smiles up into his face mischievously. "What's the matter with you?" asks she.

"It is in such bad taste," says Rylton, mollified, however, in a measure in spite of himself. "You should consider how it hurts me. You should remember you are my wife."

"I do. That is why I think I can say to you what I can't say to anybody else," says Tita quietly. "However, never mind; sit down again and let us settle the question about our guests. Here's a sheet of paper," pushing it into his hands. "And here's a pencil—an awfully bad one, any way, but if you keep sticking it into your mouth it'll write. I'm tired of licking that pencil."

She is evidently hopeless! Rylton, after that first crushing thought, gives way, and, leaning back in his chair, roars with laughter.

"And am I to lick it now!" asks he.

"No, certainly not,". She is now evidently in high dudgeon. She puts the pencil back in her pocket, and stands staring at him with her angry little head somewhat lowered. "After all, you are right; I'm horrid!" says she.

"*I'm* right! By what authority do you say that! Come now, Tita!"

"By my own."

"The very worst in the world, then. Give me back that pencil."

"Not likely," says Tita, tilting her chin. "Here's one belonging to yourself," taking one off the writing-table near. "This can't offend you, I hope. After all, I'm a poor sort," says Tita, with a disconsolate sigh that is struggling hard with a smile to gain the mastery. "It's awfully hard to offend me. I've no dignity—that's what your mother says. And after all, too," brightening up, and smiling now with delightful gaiety, "I don't want to have any. One hates to be hated!"

"What an involved speech! Well, if you won't give me your pencil, let us get on with this. Now, to begin, surely you *have* someone you would like to ask here, in spite of all you have said."

"Well—perhaps." She pauses. "I want to see Margaret," says she, hurriedly, tremulously, as if tears might be in her eyes.

He cannot be sure of that, however, as her lids are lowered. But her tone—is there a note of unhappiness in it? The very thought gives him a shock; and of late has she not been a little uncertain in her moods?

"*I* was going to name her," says Rylton.

"Then you see we have one thought in common," says Tita.

She has knelt down beside him to look at his list, and suddenly he lays his palm under her chin, and so lifts her face that he can see it.

"What is it, Tita?" says he. "Is anything troubling you? Last night you were so silent; to-day you talk. It is bad to be unequal."

His tone is grave.

"The night before last I had a bad dream," says Tita solemnly, turning her head a little to one side, and giving him a slight glance that lasts for the tiniest fraction of a second.

It occurs to Rylton that there is a little touch of wickedness in it. At all events, he grows interested.

"A bad dream?"

"Yes, the worst!" She nods her small head reproachfully at him. "I dreamt you were married to a princess!"

"Well, so I am," says Rylton, smiling.

His smile is a failure, however; something in her air has disconcerted him.

"Oh no! No, she was not like me; she was a tall princess, and she was beautiful, and her hair was like a glory round her head. She was a very dream in herself; whereas I— Naturally, that puts me out of sorts!" She shrugs her shoulders pathetically. "But last night"—she stops, clasps her hands, and sits back on her heels. "Oh no! I shan't tell you what I dreamt last night," says she. She shakes her head at him. "No, no! indeed, not if you asked me *for ever!*"

"Oh, but you must!" says he, laughing.

He catches her hands and draws her up gently into a kneeling position once more—a position that brings her slender body resting against his knees.

"Must I?" She pauses as if in amused thought, and then, leaning confidentially across his knees, says, "Well, then, I dreamt that you were madly in love with *me!* And, oh, the joy of it!"

She breaks off, and gives way to irrepressible laughter. Covering her face with her hands, she peeps at him through her fingers as a child might who is bent on mischief.

"Is all that true?" asks Maurice, colouring.

"What, the first dream or the second?"

"I presume one is as true as the other," somewhat stiffly.

"You are a prophet," says Tita, with a little grimace. "Well now, go on, do. We have arranged for Margaret." She pauses, and then says very softly, "*Darling* Margaret! Do you know, I believe she is the only friend I have in the world?"

Her words cut him to the heart.

"And I, Tita, do I not count?" asks he.

"You! No!" She gives him a little shake, taking his arms, as she kneels beside him. "You represent Society, don't you? And Society forbids all that. No man's wife is his friend nowadays."

"True," says Rylton bitterly. "Most men's wives are their enemies nowadays."

"Oh, I shan't be yours!" says Tita. "And you mustn't be mine either, remember! Well, go on—we have put down Margaret," peeping at the paper in his hand, "and no one else. Now, someone to meet her. Colonel Neilson?"

"Yes, of course; and Captain Marryatt?"

"And Mrs. Chichester to meet *him!*"

"My dear Tita, Mrs. Chichester has a husband somewhere!"

"So she told me," says Tita. "But, then, he is so *very* far off, and in your Society distance counts."

Rylton regards her with some surprise. Is she satirical?—this silly *child!*

"You will have to correct your ideas about Society," says he coldly. "By all means ask Mrs. Chichester here, too; I, for one, prefer not to believe in scandals."

"One must believe in something," says Tita. "I suppose," pencil poised in hand, "you would like to ask Mr. Gower?"

"Certainly."

"And his aunt?"

"Certainly *not.*"

"Oh, but *I* should," says Tita; "she amuses me. Do let us ask old Miss Gower!"

"I begin to think you are a wicked child," says Rylton, laughing, whereon Miss Gower's name is scrawled down on the list. "There are the men from the barracks in Merriton; they can always be asked over," goes on Maurice. "And now, who else?"

"The Marchmonts!"

"Of course." He pauses. "And then—there is Mrs. Bethune!"

"Your cousin! Yes!"

"Shall we ask her?"

"Why should we *not* ask her?" She lifts one small, delicate, brown hand, and, laying it on his cheek, turns his face to hers. "Don't look out of the window; look at *me*. Why should we not ask her?"

"My dear girl, there is no answer to such a question as that."

"No!" She scribbles Mrs. Bethune's name on her list, and then, "You particularly *wish* her to be asked?"

"Not particularly. Certainly not at all if you object to it."

"Object! Why should I object? She is amusing—she will keep us all alive; she will help you to entertain your people."

"I should hope you, Tita, would help me to do that."

"Oh, I have not the air—the manner! I shall feel like a guest myself," says Tita. She has sprung to her feet, and is now blowing a little feather she had found upon her frock up into the air. It eludes her, however; she follows it round the small table, but all in vain—it sinks to the ground. "What a *beast* of a feather!" says she.

"I don't like you to say that," says Rylton. "A guest in your own house!"

"You don't like me to say anything," says Tita petulantly. "I *told* you I was horrid. Well, I'll be mistress in my own house, if that will please you. But," prophetically, "it won't. Do you know, Maurice," looking straight at him with a defiant little mien, "I'm more glad that I can tell you that I don't care a ha'penny about you, because if I did you would break my heart."

"You have a high opinion of me!" says Maurice. "That I acknowledge. But, regarding me as you do, I wonder you ever had the courage to marry me!"

"Well, even *you* are better than Uncle George," says she. "Now, go on; is there anyone else? The Heriots! Who are they? I heard you speak of them."

"Ordinary people; but he shoots. He is a first-class shot."

"Heriot! It reminds me——" Tita grows silent a moment, and now a little flood of colour warms her face. "I have someone I want to ask, after all," cries she. "A cousin—Tom Hescott."

"A cousin?"

"Yes. And he has a sister—Minnie Hescott. I should like to ask them both." She looks at him. "They are quite presentable," says she whimsically.

"Your cousins should be, naturally," says he.

Yet his heart sinks. What sort of people are these Hescotts?

"I have not seen them for years," says Tita—"never since I lived with my father. Tom used to be with us always then, but he went abroad."

"To Australia?"

"Oh no—to Rome! To Rome first, at all events; he was going to India after that."

"For——"

"Nothing—nothing at all. Just to see the world!"

"He must have had a good deal of money!"

"More than was good for him, I often heard. But I *did* like Tom; and I heard he was in town last week, and Minnie with him, and I should like very much indeed to ask them here."

"Well, scribble down their names."

"I dare say they won't come," says Tita, writing.

"Why?"

"Oh, because they know such lots of people. However, I'll try them, any way." She flings down her pencil. "There, that's done; and now I shall go and have a ride before luncheon."

"You have been riding all the morning!"

"Yes."

"Do you never get tired?"

"Never! Come and see if I do."

"Well, I'll come," says Rylton.

"*Really!*" cries Tita; her eyes grow very bright. "You mean it?"

"Certainly I do. It is my place, you know, to see that you don't overdo it."

"Oh, how delightful!" says she, clasping her hands. "I hate riding alone. We'll go right over the downs, and back of Scart Hill, and so home. Come on—come on," running out of the room; "don't be a minute dressing."

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW A DULL MORNING GIVES BIRTH TO A STRANGE AFTERNOON. AND HOW RYLTON'S EYES ARE WIDENED BY A FRIEND.

"Good old day!" says Mrs. Chichester disgustedly. She is sitting near the window in the small drawing-room at Oakdean, watching the raindrops race each other down the panes.

"What's the matter with it?" asks Mr. Gower, who is standing beside her, much to the annoyance of Captain Marryatt, who is anxious to engage her for some waltzes at the dance old Lady Warbeck is giving in the near future.

"What *isn't* the matter with it?" asks Mrs. Chichester, turning her thin shoulders, that always have some queer sort of fascination in them, on Gower. She gives him a glance out of her blue-green eyes. She is enjoying herself immensely, in spite of the day, being quite alive to the fact that Captain Marryatt is growing desperate, and that old Miss Gower, whom Tita has insisted on asking to her house party, is thinking dark things of her from the ottoman over there.

"What's it good for, any way?"

"For the ducks," says Mr. Gower, who is always there. An answer to any question under the sun comes as naturally to him as sighing to the sad.

"Oh, well, I'm not a duck," says she prettily; whereupon Mr. Gower whispers something to her that makes her laugh, and drives Captain Marryatt to frenzy.

He comes forward.

"Lady Rylton is talking of getting up something to pass the time;" says he, regarding Mrs. Chichester with a frowning brow—a contortion that fills that frivolous young woman's breast with pure joy.

"May the heavens be her bed!" says Mr. Gower, who has spent some years in Ireland, and has succeeded in studying the lower orders with immense advantage to himself, but not very much to others. He has, at all events, carried off from them a good deal of the pleasant small-talk, whereas they had only carried off from him a wild wonder as to what he was and where born, and whether he ought or ought not to be inside a lunatic asylum. They had carried off also, I am bound to add, a considerable amount of shillings. "Lady Rylton!" to Tita, who has just come up, "is this a reality or a mere snare? Did you say you thought you could put us successfully through this afternoon without reducing us to the necessity of coming to bloodshed?" Here he looks, first at Captain Marryatt, who providentially does not see the glance, and then at Mrs. Chichester, who laughs.

"I'm not sure. I haven't quite thought it out," says Tita. "What would *you* suggest, Margaret?" to Miss Knollys. "Or you, Tom?" to a tall young man who has followed in her quick little progress across the room.

He is her cousin, Tom Hescott. He is so very much taller than she is, that she has to look up at him—the top of her head coming barely to a level with his shoulder. She smiles as she asks her question, and the cousin smiles back at her. It suddenly occurs to Sir Maurice, who has strolled into the room (and in answer to a glance from Mrs. Bethune is going to where she stands), that Tom Hescott is extraordinarily handsome.

And not handsome in any common way, either. If his father had been a duke, he could not have shown more breeding in look and gesture and voice. The fact that "Uncle Joe," the sugar merchant, *was* his actual father, does not do away with his charm; and his sister, Minnie Hescott, is almost as handsome as he is! All at once Rylton seems to remember what his wife had said to him a few weeks ago, when they were discussing the question of their guests. She had told him he need not be afraid of her relations; they were presentable enough, or something like that. Looking at Tom Hescott at this moment, Sir Maurice tells himself, with a grim smile, that he is, perhaps, a little *too* presentable—a sort of man that women always smile upon. His grim smile fades into a distinct frown as he watches Tita smiling now on the too presentable cousin.

"What is it?" asks Mrs. Bethune, making room for him in the recess of the window that is so cosily cushioned. "The cousin?"

"What cousin?" demands Sir Maurice, making a bad fight, however; his glance is still concentrated on the upper part of the room.

"Why, *her* cousin," says Mrs. Bethune, laughing. She is looking younger than ever and radiant. She is looking, indeed, beautiful. There is not a woman in the room to compare with her; and few in all England outside it.

The past week has opened out to her a little path that she feels she may tread with light feet. The cousin, the handsome, the admirable cousin! What a chance he affords for—vengeance! vengeance on that little fool over there, who has *dared* to step in and rob her—Marian Bethune—of her prey!

"Haven't you noticed?" says she, laughing lightly, and bending so close to Rylton as almost to touch his ear with her lips. "No? Oh, silly boy!"

"What do you mean?" asks Rylton a little warmly.

"And after so many days! Why, we *all* have guessed it long ago."

"I'm not good at conundrums," coldly.

"But this is such an easy one. Why, the handsome cousin is in love with the charming little wife, that is all."

"You say everyone has been talking about it," says Rylton. His manner is so strange, so unpleasant, that Marian takes warning.

"Ah! That was an exaggeration. One *does* talk much folly, you know. No—no! It was I only who said it

—at least"—hesitating—"I think so." She pauses to let her hesitation sink in, and to be as fatal as it can be. "But you know I have always your interests at heart, and so I see things that, perhaps, others do not see."

"One may see more than—"

"True—true; and of course I am wrong. No doubt I imagined it all. But, even if it should be so," laughing and patting his arm softly, "who need wonder? Your wife is so pretty—those little things often *are* pretty—and he is her cousin—they grew up together, in a sense."

"No, I think not."

"At all events, they were much together when she was growing from child to girl. And old associations—they—" She stops as if some dart has struck her. Rylton looks at her.

"Are you ill?" says he sharply. "You look pale."

"Nothing, nothing." She recovers herself and smiles at him, but her face is still white. "A thought, a mere thought—it cannot be only Tita and her cousin who have old associations, who have—*memories*."

Her eyes are full of tears. She leans toward him. This time her lips *do* touch him—softly her lips touch his cheek. The curtains hide them.

"Have *you* no memories?" says she.

"Marian! This is madness," says Rylton, turning suddenly to her. In a sense, though without a gesture, he repulses her. She looks back at him; rage is in her heart at first, but, seeing him as he is, rage gives place to triumph. He is actually livid. She has moved him, then. She still has power over him. Oh for time, time only! And he will be hers again, soul and body, and that small supplanter shall be lowered to the very dust!

* * * * *

"Oh, how delightful! The very thing," says Mrs. Chichester, clapping her hands.

The conversation at the other end of the room is growing merrier; Tita, in the midst of a small group, has evidently been suggesting something in a most animated fashion.

"We should have to put all the things back," says Minnie Hescott, glancing round her at the small chairs and tables that abound.

"Not at all—not at all," says Tita gaily; "we could go into the smaller dancing-room and have it there."

"Oh, of course! Splendid idea!" says Minnie.

She is a tall, handsome young creature, standing fully five feet five in her dainty little black silk stockings. Her eyes are dark and almond-shaped like her brother's, and there is a little droop at the far corners of the lids that adds singularly to their beauty; it gives them softness. Perhaps this softness had not been altogether meant, for Mother Nature had certainly not added gentleness to the many gifts she had given Miss Hescott at her birth. Not that the girl is of a nature to be detested; it is only that she is strong, intolerant, and self-satisfied. She grates a little. Her yea is always yea, and her nay, nay. She would always prefer the oppressed to the oppressor, unless, perhaps, the oppressor might chance to be useful to herself. She likes useful people. Yet, with all this, she is of a merry nature, and very popular with most of her acquaintances. Friends, in the strictest sense, she has none. She doesn't permit herself such luxuries.

She had been at once attracted by Tita. Naturally Tita *would* be useful to her, so she has adopted her on the spot. Baronets' wives are few and far between upon her visiting list, and to have an actual cousin for one of them sounds promising. Tita will probably be the means of getting her into the Society for which she longs; therefore Tita is to be cultivated. She had told Tom that he must be *very* specially delightful to Tita; Tom, so far, has seemed to find no difficulty in obeying her. To him, indeed, Tita is once more the little merry, tiny girl whom he had taught to ride and drive in those old, good, past, sweet days, when he used to spend all his vacations with his uncle.

"Will you come and help us?" says Tita, turning to Gower.

That young man spreads his arms abroad as if in protestation.

"What a question from you to me!" says he reproachfully.

"Call, and I follow; I follow, *though* I die!"

"You're too silly for anything," returns she most ungratefully, turning her back upon him.

"'Twas ever thus," says Mr. Gower, who seems to be in a poetical mood. "Yet what have I done?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing!" cries Tita petulantly. "It is only the day! Surely it would depress anyone!"

Her eyes wandered down the room, and are now fixed upon the curtains that hide the window where Mrs. Bethune and her husband are conversing.

"Anyone but *me!*" says Mr. Gower, with an exalted air. "I was up early this morning to——"

"Up early! I like that! When *were* you up?" asks Mrs. Chichester, between whom and Randal there is always a living feud. "Why, you can't get up even on Sundays, I hear, to be in time for service!"

"What it is to be clever!" says Mr. Gower, looking at her with enthusiastic admiration. "One hears *so much*"—pause—"that isn't true!"

"That's a mere put off," says she. "When were you up this morning? Come now—honour bright!"

"At shriek of day," says Gower with dignity. "Were *you* ever up at that time?"

"Never!" says Mrs. Chichester, laughing.

She has evidently that best of all things—a sense of humour; she gives in.

"Well, I was. I wish I hadn't been," says Mr. Gower. "When I opened my window the rain beat upon me so hard that I felt it was a sort of second edition kind of thing when I took my bath later on."

"I'm so sorry the weather is turning out so horrid," says Tita.

"I don't see why you should ever be sorry about anything," says Tom Hescott, in his slow, musical voice.

"Don't you?" She turns to him in a little quick way—a way that brings her back to that hateful window down below there. "You are right," she laughs gaily. It seems as if she had really cast that window and its occupants behind her for ever. "Well, I *won't* be. By-the-by, I told you all that we are to go to a dance at Lady Warbeck's on Thursday week? Thursday!—yes. Thursday week."

"I remember! How delightful!" cries Mrs. Chichester.

"Lady Warbeck! I know her," says Gower; "she has a son!"

"Yes—a son."

"Oh, *do* go on! Lady Rylton, do tell us about him," says Mrs. Chichester, who is ever in search of fresh fields and pastures new.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW TITA SUGGESTS A GAME OF BLIND MAN'S BUFF, AND WHAT COMES OF IT.

"Well, I hardly can," says Tita, struggling with her memory. "He seems a big man, with—*airs*, you know, and—and——"

"Trousers!" puts in Mr. Gower. "I assure you," looking confidently around him, "the checks on his trousers are so loud, that one can hear him *rattle* as he walks."

"Oh! is that the Mr. Warbeck?" says Minnie. "I know; I met him in town last July."

"You met a hero of romance, then," says Gower. "That is, a thing out of the common."

"I know him too," says Mrs. Chichester, who has been thinking. "A big man, a sort of giant?"

"A horrid man!" says Tita.

Mrs. Chichester looks at her as if amused.

"Why horrid?" asks she.

"Oh, I don't know," says Tita, shrugging her shoulders. "I didn't like him, anyway."

"I'm sure I'm not surprised," says Tom Hescott.

He takes a step closer to Tita, as if to protect her. It seems hideous to him that she should have to discuss—that she should even have known him.

"Well, neither am I," says Mrs. Chichester. "He is horrid, and as ugly as the—" She had the grace to stop here, and change her sentence. "As ugly can be."

It is a lame conclusion, but she is consoled for it by the fact that some of her audience understand what the natural end of that sentence would have been.

"And what manners!" says she. "After all," with a pretty little shake of her head, "what can you expect of a man with hair as red as a carrot?"

"Decency, at all events," says Tom Hescott coldly.

"Oh! That—last of all," says Mrs. Chichester.

"Lady Warbeck is a very charming old lady," says Margaret Knollys, breaking into the conversation with a view to changing it.

"Yes," says Mrs. Chichester. She laughs mischievously. "And such a delightful contrast to her son! She is so good."

"She's funny, isn't she?" says Tita, throwing back her lovely little head, and laughing as if at some late remembrance.

"No; good—*good!*" insists Mrs. Chichester. "Captain Marryatt, were you with me when she called that day in town? No? Oh! *well,*" with a little glance meant for him alone—a glance that restores him at once to good humour, and his position as her slave once more—"you ought to have been."

"What did she say, then?" asks Minnie Hescott.

"Nothing to signify, really. But as a contrast to her son, she is perhaps, as Lady Rylton has just said, 'funny.' It was about a book—a book we are all reading nowadays; and she said she couldn't recommend it to me, as it *bordered* on impropriety! I was so enchanted."

"I know the book you mean," says Mrs. Bethune, who has just sauntered up to them in her slow, graceful fashion.

"Well, of course," says Mrs. Chichester. "Such nonsense condemning it! As if anybody worried about impropriety nowadays. Why, it has gone out of fashion. It is an exploded essence. Nobody gives it a thought."

"That is *fatally true,*" says old Miss Gower in a sepulchral tone. She has been sitting in a corner near them, knitting sedulously until now. But now she uplifts her voice. She uplifts her eyes, too, and fixes them on Mrs. Chichester the frivolous. "Do your own words never make you shiver?" asks she austere.

"Never," gaily; "I often wish they would in warm weather."

Miss Gower uprears herself.

"Be careful, woman! be careful!" says she gloomily. "There is a warmer climate in store for some of us than has been ever known on earth!"

She turns aside abruptly, and strides from the room.

Randal Gower gives way to mirth, and so do most of the others. Mrs. Chichester, it is true, laughs a little, but Tita can see that the laughter is somewhat forced.

She goes quickly up to her and slips her hand into hers.

"Don't mind her," says she. "As if a little word here and there would count, when one has a good

heart, and I know you have one. We shall all go to heaven, I think, don't you? Don't mind what she hinted about—about that other place, you know."

"Eh?" says Mrs. Chichester, staring at her as if astonished.

"I *saw* you didn't like it," says Tita.

"Well, I didn't," says Mrs. Chichester, pouting.

"No, of course, one wouldn't."

"One wouldn't what?"

"Like to be told that one would have to go to—*you* know."

"Oh, I see," says Mrs. Chichester, with some disgust. "Is that what you mean? Oh, I shouldn't care a fig about that!"

"About what, then?" asks Tita anxiously.

"Well, I didn't like to be called *a woman!*" says Mrs. Chichester, frowning.

"Oh!" says Tita.

"Lady Rylton, where are you? You said you were going to get up blind man's buff," cries someone at this moment.

"Yes, yes, indeed. Maurice, will you come and help us?" says Tita, seeing her husband, and going to him gladly, as a means of getting out of her ridiculous interview with Mrs. Chichester, which has begun to border on burlesque.

"Certainly," says Sir Maurice; he speaks rapidly, eagerly, as if desirous of showing himself devoted to any project of hers.

"Well, then, come on—come on," cries she, gaily beckoning to her guests right and left, and carrying them off, a merry train, to the ball-room.

"Now, who'll be blinded first?" asks Mr. Gower, who has evidently constituted himself Master of the Ceremonies.

"You!" cries Miss Hescott.

"Not at all. There is only one fair way of arranging that," says Tita. "I'll show you. Now," turning to her husband, "make them all catch hands, Maurice—all in a ring, don't you know—and I'll show you."

They all catch hands; there is a slight tussle between Captain Marryatt and Mr. Gower (who is nothing if not a born nuisance wherever he goes), as to which of them is to take Mrs. Chichester's right hand. This, providentially, is arranged by Mr. Gower's giving in, and consenting on a grimace from her to take her *left* hand. Not that he wants it. Tom Hescott has shown himself desirous of taking Tita's small fingers into his possession for the time being, at all events—a fact pointed out to Rylton by Mrs. Bethune with a low, amused little laugh; but Tita had told him to go away, as she couldn't give her hand to *anybody* for a moment, as she was going to have the conduct of the affair.

"Now, are you all ready?" asks she, and seeing them standing in a circle, hands entwined, she runs suddenly to Maurice, disengages his hand from Mrs. Bethune's with a little airy grace, gives her right hand to the latter, and the left to Maurice, and, having so joined the broken ring again, leans forward.

"Now," cries she gaily, her lovely little face lit up with excitement, "who ever the *last* word comes to, he or she will have to hunt us! See?"

She takes her right hand from Mrs. Bethune's, that she may point her little forefinger at each one in succession, and begins her incantation with Mr. Gower, who is directly opposite to her, nodding her head at each mystic word; and, indeed, so far as the beginning of it goes, this strange chant of hers mystifies everybody—everybody except Tom Hescott, who has played this game with her before, in the not so very distant past—Tom Hescott, who is now gazing at her with a most profound regard, all his soul in his eyes, oblivious of the fact that two pairs of eyes, at all events, are regarding him very curiously.

"Hena, Dena, Dina, Dus."

"Good heavens!" interrupts Mr. Gower, with extravagant admiration. "What command of language!

I"—to miss Hescott—"didn't know she was a linguist, did you?"

"Calto, Wheela, Kila, Kus."

"Oh, I say!" murmurs Mr. Gower faintly. "It can't be right, can it, to say 'cuss words' at us like that? Oh, really, Rylton, _would _you mind if I retired?"

"Hot pan, Mustard, Jan,
Tiddledum, taddledum, twenty-one,
You raise up the latch, and walk straight out."

The last word falls on Tom Hescott. "Out" comes to him.

"There, Tom! You must be blindfolded," says Tita delightfully. "Who's got a *big* handkerchief?"

"I wouldn't stand that, Hescott, if I were you," says Colonel Neilson, laughing.

"What is it?" asks Tom, who is a little abstracted.

"Nothing much," says Mrs. Chichester mischievously. "Except that Lady Rylton says your head is so big that she has sent to the housekeeper for a young sheet to tie it up in."

Hescott smiles. He can well afford his smile, his head being wonderfully handsome, not too small, but slender and beautifully formed.

"Give me yours," says Tita, thrusting her hand into her husband's pocket and pulling out his handkerchief.

The little familiar action sends a sharp pang through Mrs. Bethune's heart.

"Now, Tom, come and be decorated," cries Tita. Hescott advances to her, and stops as if waiting. "Ah!" cries she, "do you imagine I could ever get up there!"

She raises both her arms to their fullest height, which hardly brings her pretty hands even to a level with his forehead. She stands so for a moment, laughing at him through the gracefully uplifted arms. It is a coquettish gesture, though certainly innocent, and nobody, perhaps, would have thought anything of it but for the quick, bright light that springs into Hescott's eyes. So she might stand if she were about to fling her arms around his neck.

"Down on your knees," cries Tita, giving herself the airs of a little queen.

Hescott drops silently on to them. He has never once removed his gaze from hers. Such a strange gaze! One or two of the men present grow amused, all the women interested. Margaret Knollys makes an involuntary step forward, and then checks herself.

"There!" says Tita, who has now bound the handkerchief over Hescott's eager eyes. "Now are you sure you can't see? Not a blink?" She turns up his chin, and examines him carefully. "I'm *certain* you can see out of this one," says she, and pulls the handkerchief a little farther over the offending eye. "Now, get up. 'How many horses in your father's stable?'"

This is an embarrassing question, or ought to be, as Mr. Hescott's father is dead; but he seems quite up to it. Indeed, it now occurs to Sir Maurice that this cannot be the first time he has played blind man's buff with his cousin.

"Three white and three gray."

"An excellent stud!" says Mr. Gower.

But Tita is not thinking of frivolities. Like Elia's old lady, the "rigour of game" is all she cares for. She gives Tom Hescott one or two little turns.

"Then turn about, and turn about," says she, suiting the action to the word, "'And you don't catch *me* till May-day.'"

With this, she gives him a delicate little shove, and, picking up the train of her gown, springs lightly backwards to the wall behind her.

And now the fun grows fast and furious. Hescott, who, I regret to say, must have disarranged that handkerchief once for all, is making great running with the lady guests. As Mr. Gower remarks, it is

perfectly wonderful how well he and Marryatt and the other men can elude him. There is no difficulty at all about it! Whereas Mrs. Chichester is in danger of her life any moment, and Mrs. Bethune has had several narrow escapes. Tita, who is singularly nimble (fairies usually are), has been able to dart to and fro with comparative ease; but Margaret Knollys, who, to everybody's immense surprise, is enjoying herself down to the ground, was very nearly caught once.

"That was a near shave," says Colonel Neilson, who happens to be near her when she runs, flushed and laughing, to the doorway. And then—"How you are enjoying yourself!"

"Yes. Isn't it foolish of me," says she; but she laughs still.

"It is the essence of wisdom," says Neilson.

Here a little giggle from Mrs. Chichester tells of *her* having been nearly caught. And now, now there is a skirmish down there, and presently they can see Hescott drawing Tita reluctantly forward.

Tita is making frantic signs to Mr. Gower.

"It's not a fair capture unless you can guess the name of your captive," says Gower, in answer to that frantic if silent appeal.

Hescott raises his right hand, pretends to feel blindly in the air for a moment, then his hand falls on Tita's sunny little head. It wanders on her short curls—it is a very slow wandering.

Mrs. Bethune looks up at Rylton, who is standing beside her.

"Do you still doubt?" asks she, in a low whisper.

"Doubt! I am a past master at it," says he bitterly. "I should be! *You* taught me!"

"I! Oh, Maurice!"

"Yes—you! Yesterday, as it seems to me, I believed in everyone. To-day I doubt every soul I meet."

At this point Hescott's "doubts," at all events, seem to be set at rest. His hand has ceased to wander over the pretty head, and in a low tone he says:

"Titania!"

This word is meant for Tita alone. A second later he calls aloud:

"Lady Rylton!"

But Maurice and Mrs. Bethune, who had been standing just behind him, had heard that whispered first word.

"Oh, you rare right," says Tita petulantly. "But you would never have known me but for my hair. And I *hate* being blindfolded, too. Maurice, will you take it for me?" holding out to him the handkerchief.

"No!" says Rylton quietly, but decisively—so decisively that Mrs. Chichester suddenly hides her face behind her fan.

"What a No!" says she to Captain Marryatt. "Did you hear it? What's the matter with him?"

"He's jealous, perhaps," says Captain Marryatt.

Mrs. Chichester gives way to wild, if suppressed, mirth.

"Heavens! Fancy being jealous of one's own wife!" says she. "Now, if it had been anyone else's——"

"Yes, there would be reason in that!" says Captain Marryatt, so gloomily that her mirth breaks forth afresh.

He is always a joy to her, this absurd young man, who, in spite of barbs and shafts, follows at her chariot wheels with a determination worthy of a better cause.

Gower, who also had heard that quiet "No," had come instantly forward, and entreated Tita to blindfold him. And once more the fun is at its height. Hescott, as compared with Randal Gower, is not even *in* it in this game. The latter simulates the swallow, and even outdoes that wily bird in his swift dartings to and fro. Great is his surprise, and greater still his courage—this last is acknowledged by *all*

—when, on a final swoop round the room with arms extended, he suddenly closes them round the bony form of Miss Gower, who had returned five minutes ago, and who, silent and solitary, is standing in a distant corner breathing anathemas upon the game.

Everyone stops dead short—everyone looks at the ceiling; surely it *must* fall! There had been a general, if unvoiced, opinion up to this that Mr. Gower could *see*; but now he is at once exonerated, and may leave the dock at any moment without a stain upon his character.

"Come away! come away!" whisper two or three behind his back.

Mrs. Chichester pulls frantically at his coat-tails; but Mr. Gower holds on. He passes his hand over Miss Gower's gray head.

"It is—it is—it *must* be!" cries he, in a positive tone.

"It"—here his hand flies swiftly down her warlike nose—"it is Colonel Neilson!" declares he, with a shout of triumph.

"Unhand me, sir!" cries Miss Gower.

She had not spoken up to this—but to compare her to a man! She moves majestically forward. Gower unhands her, and, lifting one side of his would-be blind, regards her fixedly.

"It was the nose!" He looks round reproachfully at Neilson. "Just see what you've let me in for!" says he.

"Don't talk to me, sir!" cries his aunt indignantly. "Make no excuses—none need be made! When one plays demoralizing games in daylight, one should be prepared for anything;" and with this she once more leaves the room.

"Ah, we should have played demoralizing games at *midnight*," says Mr. Gower, who doesn't look half as much ashamed of himself as he ought, "then we should have been all right."

Here somebody who is standing at one of the windows says suddenly:

"It is clearing!"

"Is it?" cries Tita. "Then I suppose we ought to go out! But what a pity we couldn't have another game first!"

She looks very sorry.

"You certainly seemed to enjoy it," says Sir Maurice with a cold smile, as he passes her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW TITA GETS A SCOLDING, AND HOW SHE REBELS AND ACCUSES SIR MAURICE OF BREACH OF CONTRACT.

"Can I come in?"

Rylton's voice is a little curt as he knocks at his wife's door. It is not the door opening into the corridor outside, but the inner door that leads from her room to his, and to the dressing-room beyond.

"Yes, of course," cries Tita pleasantly.

She is just on the point of dismissing her maid for the night—the maid who has so little to do; no long hair to brush, only the soft little curly locks that cover her mistress's head. She has taken off Tita's evening gown, and, now that the little locks have been carefully seen to, has taken off her dressing-gown also. It occurs to Tita that she might as well take *herself* off as well, and as soon as possible.

This thought makes her laugh.

"You can go now, Sarah," says she to the maid, who loves her; "and don't bring me my tea before eight to-morrow, because I'm as sleepy as sleepy can be."

She nods kindly to the dismissed maid, and, going to the door where Rylton is presumably standing, lets him in.

"How early you are!" says she, thinking of the glories of the smoking-room below.

"How late you are!" returns he. "I half fancied you would have been asleep by this time!"

"Oh, well, I soon shall be!" says she. "I was just going to say my prayers as you came in; after that it won't take me a minute to get out of my clothes, and," with a little laugh, "into my bed."

Her clothes, as she stands at present, are so becoming that it seems quite a pity that she should ever get out of them. Her neck and arms—soft and fair and round as a little child's—are shining in the lamplight, and beneath them the exquisite lace petticoat she wears gives her the air of one who is just going to a fancy ball. It is short enough to show the perfect little feet and the slender ankles beneath it.

"How inhospitable of you to desert your friends so soon!" says she. "Why, you never come up till two, do you?—at least, so you tell me."

"You will catch cold if you stay like that," says he.

It is a somewhat irrelevant remark; but, for the first time in all his knowledge of her, the tender charm that is her own becomes clear to him. It seems to him that she is a new being—one he has never seen before; and, with this fresh knowledge, his anger towards her grows stronger.

"I!—in this weather! Why, it is hardly chilly even yet, in spite of the rain; and, besides, I have this fire!" She catches his hand, and draws him towards the hearthrug. "I am sure you have something to say to me," says she. "Come and sit by the fire, and tell me all about it."

"It is nothing, really," says Rylton, resisting her pretty efforts to push him into a luxurious lounging chair. "It is only a question about your cousin."

He leans his elbow on the chimney-piece, and looks down at her—a dainty fairy lying now in the bosom of some soft pink cushions, with her legs crossed and her toes towards the fire. She has clasped her arms behind her head.

"About Minnie?"

"No."

His heart hardens again. Is this duplicity on her part? How small, how innocent, how girlish, how—reluctantly this—beautiful she looks! and yet—

"About Tom, then?"

"About Mr. Hescott"—coldly—"yes."

"What! you don't like him?" questions Tita, abandoning her lounging attitude, and leaning towards him.

"So far as he is concerned," with increasing coldness, "I am quite indifferent to him; it is of you I think."

"Of me! And why of me? Why should you think of me?"

"I hardly know," somewhat bitterly; "except that it is perhaps better that *I* should criticise your conduct than—other people."

"I don't know what you mean!" says Tita slowly.

Her charming face loses suddenly all its vivacity; she looks a little sad, a little forlorn.

"There is very little to know," says Rylton hurriedly, touched by her expression.

"But you said—you spoke of my *conduct!*"

"Well, and is there nothing to be said of that? This cousin——" He stops, and then goes on abruptly: "Why does he call you Titania?"

"Oh, it is an old name for me!" She looks at him, and, leaning back again in her chair, bursts out laughing. She has flung her arms over her head again, and now looks at him from under one of them with a mischievous smile. "Is *that* the whole?" says she. "He used to call me that years ago. He used to say I was like a fairy queen."

"Used he?"

Rylton's face is untranslatable.

"Yes. I was the smallest child alive, I do believe." She springs to her feet, and goes up to Rylton in a swaying, graceful little fashion. "I'm not so very big even *now*, am I?" says she.

Rylton turns his eyes from hers with open determination; he steels his heart against her.

"About this cousin," he says icily. "He is the one who used to say you had hands like iron, and a heart like velvet?"

"Yes. *Fancy* you remembering that!" says Tita, a sudden, quick gleam of pleasure dyeing her pretty cheeks quite red.

"I always remember," returns Rylton distantly.

His tone is a repulse. The lovely colour fades from her face.

"I'm tired," says she suddenly, petulantly. She moves to the other end of the room, and, opening a wardrobe, pretends to make some rearrangements with its contents. "If you have nothing more to say"—with perhaps more honesty than politeness—"I wish you would go away."

"I *have* something more to say." The very nervousness he is feeling makes his tone unnecessarily harsh. "I object to your extreme intimacy with your cousin."

Tita drops the dress she has just taken from the wardrobe, and comes back once more into the full light of the lamp. Her bared and slender arms are now hanging straight before her, her fingers interlaced; she looks up at him.

"With *Tom*?"

"With Mr. Hescott."

"I have known Tom all my life," defiantly.

"I don't care about that. One may know people all one's life, and yet have very unpleasant things said about one."

"*Can* one——" She stops suddenly, facing him, her eyes fixed on his; her lips part, her slight little frame quivers as if with eagerness. It grows quite plain that there is something she desires passionately to say to him—something terrible— but all at once she controls herself; she makes a little gesture with her right hand, as if throwing something from her, and goes on quickly, excitedly: "What do you mean? Who has been talking about me?"

"I didn't say anyone had been talking about you."

"Yes, you did! You hinted it, at all events. Go on. Tell me who it was."

"Even if I knew I should not tell you," says Rylton, who is now white with anger.

He had understood her hesitation of a moment since. He had known exactly what she wanted to say to him, and unfortunately the pricking of his conscience had only served to add fuel to the fire of his discontent towards her.

"Well, *I'll* tell *you*," says Tita, coming a step closer to him, her eyes blazing. "It was Mrs. Bethune. I know that she is no friend of mine. And I may as well say at once that I detest her. *You* may like her, but I don't, and I never shall. She's a *beast!*"

"Tita!"

Her husband stares at her aghast. The small form seems transfigured. Has she grown?

"Yes—a *beast!* I don't care what you think. I'm not afraid of you—remember that! I was not even afraid of Uncle George. I shall never be afraid of anyone in all this wide, wide world!"

Suddenly her passion breaks down. Her arms fall to her sides, and she leans back against the end of her bed like a broken lily.

"Tita—if you would let me explain," says Rylton, who is overcome by her forlorn attitude, "I——"

"No." He would have laid his hands gently upon her pretty bare shoulders, but she repulses him. "I

want no explanation; there *isn't* one."

Then, to his surprise and misery, she covers her face with both her hands and bursts into tears.

"You are unkind," sobs she wildly. "And you are not *true*. You don't tell the truth. You said—you *said*," passionately, "that you would be good to me. That you would let me do as I liked—that I should be happy! That was why I married you! That I might be happy! And now—now——"

"But to do as you liked! Tita, be reasonable."

"Oh, *reasonable!* Uncle George used to talk to me like that. *He* was a reasonable person, I suppose; and so are you. And he—hated me!" She grows silent as one might when some dreadful thought assails one. "Perhaps," says the poor child, in a quick, frightened sort of way, "you hate me too. Perhaps everyone hates me. There are people whom everyone hates, aren't there?"

"Are there?" asks Rylton drearily.

At this moment, at all events, he feels himself to be hateful. What a pitiful little face he is looking at!

"Yes, my uncle detested me," says Tita slowly, as if remembering things. "He said I ought not to have had all that money. That if I had not been born, he would have had it. But one can't help being born. One isn't asked about it! If"—she pauses, and the tears well up into her eyes again—"if *I* had been asked, I should have said no, *no*, NO!"

"Don't talk like that," says Rylton.

There is a sensation of chokiness about his throat. How young she is—how small—and to be *already* sorry that ever she was born! What a slender little hand! Just now it is lying crushed against her breast. And those clear eyes. Oh, if only he could have felt differently towards her—if he could have loved her! All this passes through his mind in an instant. He is even thinking of making her some kindly speech that shall heal the present breach between them, when she makes a sudden answer to his last remark.

"If you weren't here, I shouldn't have to talk at all," says she.

"True," he returns, feeling a little discomfited. "Well, good-night, Tita."

"Good-night."

She refuses to see his proffered hand.

"Of course," says Rylton, who now feels *he* is in the wrong, "I am very sorry that I—that I——"

"Yes, so am I," with a saucy little tilting of her chin.

"Sorry," continues Rylton, with dignity, "that I felt it my duty to—to——"

"Make a fool of yourself? *So am I!*" says Lady Rylton.

After this astounding speech there is silence for a moment or two. Then Rylton, in spite of himself, laughs. And after a faint struggle with *her self*, Tita joins in his mirth. Emboldened by this departure, and really anxious to make it up with her, Rylton bids her good-night again, and this time would have added a kiss to his adieu. But Tita pushed him away.

"Kiss you? Not likely!" says she scornfully; "I shall never want to kiss you again in all my life!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW RYLTON'S HEART CONDEMNS HIM. AND HOW, AS HE WALKS, A SERPENT STINGS HIM. AND HOW HE IS RECOVERED OF HIS WOUND. AND HOW THE LITTLE RIFT IS MENDED—BUT WITH TOO FINE THREAD.

Rylton had gone to his own room in a strange frame of mind. He called it aggrieved, but, *au fond*, there were some grains of remorse at the bottom of it. He had married her, and in spite of all things was bound to protect her. That sad little touch of hers, "Perhaps everyone hates me," had gone to his heart.

There were other things that had gone home too. Little things, but bitter to the senses of one highly

cultured; and of course the Ryltons had been accustomed to the best of things always. Tita's phrases grated a good deal. That "make a fool of yourself" had sunk deep, and there were so many other extraordinary expressions. The women of his own world very often used them in fun, but Tita used them in earnest: that made all the difference.

And yet—he was sorry that he had vexed her. It kept him sleepless an hour almost, dwelling upon this, and even in the morning, when he awoke, it was the first thought that assailed him.

* * * * *

It is in truth a lovely morning. Sweet as June, and fresh as "Fresh May."

Rylton, whilst dressing, tells himself he wishes to goodness he had been clever enough to make it up with his wife before going to bed last night. Nothing so horrid as little coldnesses, little bickerings before one's guests—and Tita is so untutored that probably she will make it rather unbearable for him during breakfast.

He has underrated Tita, however. She is almost the first down, and gets through the morning salutations to her guests in the gayest style, and takes possession of the teapot and the huge old urn quite calmly. She has delivered up the coffee to Margaret, to whom she always look as a sure ally. So calm, so pretty in her demeanour, that Rylton, taking heart of grace, throws to her a word or two—to his utter chagrin!

Not that the words are not responded to; not one of them, indeed, but is answered, yet Tita's eyes had not gone with her words. They had been downcast; busied, presumably, with the tea-cup now, or a smile to her neighbour on her left, or a chiding to the fox-terrier at her knee. She gives Rylton the impression, at all events, that she will be civil to him in the future, but that she regrets the fact that she has to be.

When the hateful meal is over he rises, telling himself that he must make it up with her, and as soon as possible. That child! to have a living feud with *her*. It is out of the question! And, besides, before one's guests! How bad it will look. A disagreement is not allowed between a host and hostess—when one is staying in their house, at all events. It is quite simple to get all the quarrelling over beforehand, to so arrange as to look like winged angels when one's house-party is here to see.

He refuses to have anything to do with a swift glance from Mrs. Bethune as he leaves the breakfast-room. He gets quickly past her, disturbed at heart, and going through the hall, turns abruptly towards the stables.

The day is lovely. A sort of Indian summer reigns. And presently most of those staying in the house turn their steps towards the pleasure grounds. The tennis courts have been kept marked, in spite of the fact that the regular tennis season is at an end, and Mr. Gower, who is an indefatigable player, has called on Miss Hescott to get up a double with him.

The idea has evidently caught on, for now everyone seems to be swarming tennis-wards, rackets in hand, and tennis shoes on feet.

Rylton, turning back from the stables an hour later, and with a mind still much upset, finds all the courts occupied, and everyone very much alive. Standing on the top of the stone steps that lead down to one of the courts, he glances sharply round him. No! Tita is not here. Tita, who is a perfect devotee where tennis is concerned. Where is she, then? A second time his glance sweeps the tennis courts, and now his brow grows dark; Hescott is not here, either.

He draws in his breath a little sharply, and without descending the steps, goes round the courts nearest him to where an opening in the wood will lead him beyond fear of conversation.

As he reaches this opening, a voice behind him cries gaily, "Whither away, Sir Maurice?"

He turns and manages to smile pleasantly at Minnie Hescott, who, with Mrs. Bethune, is close behind him. A fancy that Marian has brought Miss Hescott here to say something occurs to him, and he curses himself for the thought. Is he growing suspicious of *everyone*?

"I was going down to one of the lower farms," says he in a light tone. He had not been going there, but the evasion seems impossible to avoid.

"You won't find anything *there*," says Mrs. Bethune, smiling at him. She is dressed entirely in black, and from under the huge black hat that shades her face her eyes gleam up at him in a sort of mockery—sad, yet beseeching. She is looking beautiful! Her pale face, so refined; the masses of her rich, red hair shining gorgeously in the clear sunlight.

"No? I shall find old Wicks and his wife, at all events."

"Oh, that? Yes."

"Why, what did you think I was looking for?"

"I really hardly know;" she smiles, and then says quietly, "Why, amusement, of course."

At this moment Minnie Hescott, who detests being left out of anything, determines on boring a way into the *tête-à-tête* before her.

"Where is Tita?" asks she. "We wanted her for tennis, she is such a good player; but no one could find her."

"Not even your brother?" asks Mrs. Bethune.

"Not even Tom; she disappeared somewhere after breakfast."

"Why, so did he!" and Mrs. Bethune lifts her brows in a very amused fashion.

"Oh no, he didn't," says Minnie Hescott, casting a sudden shrewd glance at her. "He was in the library writing letters till an hour ago. I know that, because I was with him."

"What an excellent sister you are!" says Mrs. Bethune, with a slight laugh.

"Why?" asks Miss Hescott slowly. "Because I was with him?" Her tone is a little dangerous.

"Naturally," says Mrs. Bethune, saving herself promptly. "To be always with one's brother shows devotion indeed; but you forget your *rôle*, don't you? Where has he been for the past hour? You haven't told us that! Surely you have not forsaken him now, when it may be the hour of his extremity." Her tone is jesting, but all through it Rylton can read between the lines.

"He is with Colonel Neilson, at the kennels," replies Miss Hescott promptly.

"Ah, I told you you were a good sister," says Mrs. Bethune.

"Because I said Tom was with Colonel Neilson? Do you think he *isn't* with him?" asks Minnie, looking at her fixedly.

"My *dear* girl! What a *bêtise*! No! Because you take such care to know what he is doing. And so he is now with Colonel Neilson?"

"Yes," shortly.

"I'm afraid I must go," says Sir Maurice; "if I don't catch those Wickses at this hour I shall never catch them at all." He nods to Minnie. For a second his eyes meet Marian's. There is something in them that so satisfies her, that on way back with Minnie she makes herself thoroughly agreeable to that astute damsel. What *was* there in his eye?—rage, hatred, revenge!

In truth, Rylton's mind is full of evil thoughts as he strides onward into the recesses of the wood. The falling autumn leaves crackle beneath his swift tread, and through the trees the sky shows signs of storm. But what storm in all Nature can be compared with the rage that stirs the heart of man?

Marian Bethune's covert hints, added to his own suspicions, have set his heart on fire! And that girl's attempts at evasion, her hiding of her brother's faults—all that, too, had been laid bare to him by Marian!

Just now it seems to him as true as life itself that Tita and Tom Hescott have gone for a walk together; somewhere—anywhere beyond the ken of those of her own household. To think that he should have sacrificed his whole life—that he should have married this child, who is less to him than thistledown, to be cast aside by her, and to let her bring down his good name with ignominy to the dust.

He is striding onwards, lost in miserable thought, when suddenly footsteps, coming quickly towards him, rouse him. Someone is laughing. The laughter strikes to his very soul. When people laugh seldom, one always knows their laugh. Before Tom Hescott turns the corner Rylton knows it is his. But his companion!

"Why, there you are, Rylton!" says Colonel Neilson at the top of his voice. "By Jove! well met! We've been disputing about a point in the tenant right down here, and you can set us straight!"

Rylton can hardly account to himself for the terrible revulsion of feeling he endures at this moment. Is it joy? *Can* it be joy? What is she to him or he to her? Yet positively it is a most thankful joy he feels as he sees these two men approaching him together. After all, Minnie Hescott had been right. It is perhaps worthy of notice that he does not say to himself that Marian Bethune had been wrong!

He sets Colonel Neilson straight on a point or two, and then goes on again, striking now, however, into a pathway that leads him very far from the farm he had proposed to visit. It opens out into a pleasant little green sward dotted with trees, through which the sun glints delicately. One of these trees is a gnarled old oak.

As Rylton steps into this open glade the oak attracts him. He looks at it—first carelessly, and then with sharp interest. What strange fruit is that hanging on it? A foot!—an exquisite little slipper!

He stands still, and looks higher; and there he sees Tita embedded amongst the leaves, half reclining on a giant bough and reading. The book is on her knees, her eyes upon her book.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW TITA TAKES HIGH GROUND, AND HOW SHE BRINGS HER HUSBAND, OF ALL PEOPLE, TO HER FEET.

She looks like a little elf. All at once the pretty beauty of her breaks upon Rylton. The reaction from such extreme doubt of her to a clear certainty has made his appreciation of her kinder—has, perhaps, opened his eyes to the perfections she possesses. However this may be, there is, beyond question, a great deal of remorse in his soul as he walks towards the tree in which she sits enshrined.

How will she receive him? Not a word, save those much-begrudged ones at breakfast, has passed between them since last night; and this hurrying away from the others, does it not mean a dislike to meet *him*?

"You have mounted very high in the world!" says he, stopping beneath the tree and addressing her.

He has come towards her very softly on the grass—so softly that she has not heard his coming. And now, as he speaks, she starts violently, and looks down at him as if surprised out of all measure. In a second, however, she recovers herself.

"True!" says she; "I have married you!"

It is to be still war, then! Rylton bites his lips, but controls himself. It is plain he is not forgiven. But, after all, she has had something to forgive, and more—*far* more than she even knows. That last suspicion of her was base.

"That is an unkind little speech!" says he gently. "It reminds me that it was you who set *me* up in the world."

This shaft tells.

Tita colours warmly; her generous soul shrinks from such an accusation.

"I didn't mean that," says she; "you know very well I didn't. I wish," petulantly, "you would go away; I want to read."

"Well, I'm going," says Rylton. As a means of carrying out this promise, he props himself up with a branch of the tree on which she is sitting—a branch on a level with her dainty little silk-clad feet. He has leant both his arms on it, and now involuntarily his eyes rest upon her shoes. "What beautiful feet you have!" says he slowly.

It is a perfectly Machiavellian speech. Tita's feet are beyond argument, and there is not a woman in *this* world, any way, who has beautiful feet, who doesn't want everyone to tell her all about them.

"No, no; they're nothing," says she, making a pretence of tucking up the much-maligned feet in question under her frock, which basely fails to help her.

But even as she says this she smiles—reluctantly, no doubt; but, still, she *does* smile—and casts a

glance at Rylton from under her long lashes. It is a delightful look—half pleased, half defiant, wholly sweet.

"Forgive me, Tita!" says her husband quickly.

"I don't want you to talk to me like that," says she, with a frown.

"But I must say that. Well, will you?"

"I don't know." She stops, and again casts that pretty glance at him. "At all events, you will have to promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"No; I'm in earnest."

"So am I."

He ventures now to take one of the charming feet so close to him into one of his hands, and strokes the instep softly with the other.

"Oh no! you are never in earnest with me," says the girl. "But what I want you to say is, that you won't do it again."

"Do what?"

"Scold me."

"Never—never!" says Rylton.

"That's a promise, mind."

"I shall mind it."

"Very well—I forgive you."

"Let me bring you back to Mother Earth, then," says Rylton.

"No, thank you; I can take myself down."

"That's being unkind to yourself. Take down your friends if you like, but spare yourself."

"I should like to take *you* down," says she maliciously.

"Am *I* your friend, then?"

"No—no, indeed!"

"Well——"

He pauses and looks at her. All at once it seems to him that perhaps he *is* her friend—a friend—a mere friend! But could a man who loved another woman be an honest friend to his wife?

"Are you?" asks Tita.

"Yes. Didn't I want to take you down just now?"

At this she gives in and laughs a little. He laughs too.

"You are too clever for me," says she.

"And you—what are you? Too good for me, perhaps."

"I don't think you ought to say things you don't mean," says Tita. "But as you have made that promise—why, you *may* take me down now."

She leans towards him, holding out her arms. He takes her into his, and brings her slowly, carefully to the grass beside him. Even when safely landed here he still holds her.

"We *are* friends?" asks he.

His tone is a question.

"Yes, yes, of course," impatiently. "Are they playing tennis? Do you think they want me?"

It is impossible for him to misunderstand her meaning. A longing to get back to the others to play, and win at her favourite game of tennis, has been in part the cause of her ready forgiveness.

"Certainly they want you," says he, surprised at himself for the touch of chagrin he feels. "But," still holding her, "you have quite made it up with me, haven't you?"

"Quite—quite."

"But what a way to make it up!" says Rylton reproachfully.

He is smiling all through, however.

"What's the matter with it?" asks Tita.

"Don't you know? Must I tell you? Last night, Tita, you told me you would never want to kiss me again."

"Well, kissing's a bore," says Tita, with a little grimace. "I never want to kiss anyone really, except ___"

She hesitates.

"Except?" asks Rylton, his grasp tighter on her arms.

"Except Margaret."

Rylton bursts out laughing; for the moment he believes her, afterwards—

"What a baby you are!" says he; "and what a cruel baby! Tita, I shan't believe you have forgiven me unless you—"

"I think it is *you* who are the baby," says she, with a shrug. "What on earth *do* you want to kiss me for? Well, there," holding up to him the coolest, freshest cheek in the world, "you can kiss me if you like."

"Is that all?" says Rylton, somewhat piqued.

"Yes—all," with decision. "I can't bear people to kiss me on my mouth."

"Perhaps you would prefer that people would not kiss you at all?"

"Well, yes, I should," says she. "But," quickly, "of course, you are not quite like other people. You may kiss my cheek if you like."

"Thank you," says Rylton. "I appreciate the difference."

He kisses her cheek discreetly, but would have liked to shake her as he does so.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW EVERYONE GOES TO LADY WARBECK'S DANCE, AND HELPS TO MAKE IT A SUCCESS; AND HOW MANY CURIOUS THINGS ARE SAID AND DONE THERE.

Everyone has come now, and old Lady Warbeck, resplendent in pearls and brocade, has dropped into a chair that some charitable person has placed behind her.

It is indeed close upon midnight, and dancing it at its height. Flowers are everywhere, and a band from town has been secured. This latter is quite a flight on the part of Lady Warbeck, who, as a rule, trusts the music to the local geniuses. Altogether everyone acknowledges it is very well done. Very well done *indeed*, and a good deal more than one would expect from the Warbecks!

Old Sir Thomas is marching round, paying senile compliments to all the prettiest girls; his son Gillam, with a diamond stud that you could see a mile off, is beaming on Mrs. Bethune, who is openly encouraging him. Indeed, "The Everlasting," as he is called by his friends (it is always one's friends who give one a bad name), is careering round and about Mrs. Bethune with a vigour hardly to be expected of him. He is looking even younger than usual. Though fully forty-five, he still looks only thirty—the

reason of his nickname! Everyone is a little surprised at Mrs. Bethune's civility to him, she having been studiously cold to all men save her cousin Sir Maurice during the past year; but Mrs. Bethune herself is quite aware of what she is doing. Of late—it seems difficult of belief—but of late she has fancied Maurice has avoided her. He was always a little highflown with regard to morals, dear Maurice, but she will reform him! A touch, just a *touch* of jealousy will put an end to the moral question!

She has thrown aside the dark colours she usually affects, and is to-night all in white. So is Tita. So is Mrs. Chichester, for the matter of that. The latter is all smiles, and is now surrounded by a little court of admirers at the top of the room, Captain Marryatt, fatuous as ever, by her side, and the others encircling her.

"Quite refreshing to see so many men all together," says she in a loud voice, addressing everybody at once. She likes an audience. "As a rule, when one gets into the country, one sticks a glass in one's eye, and ask, 'Where's the MAN?'"

"I never heard anything so unkind in my life," says Mr. Gower, with a deep reproach. "I'm sure ever since *you* have been in the country you have had a regiment round you, waiting on your lightest word."

"Oh! you git!" says Mrs. Chichester, who is as vulgar as she is well-born. Her glance roams down the room. "Just look at Mrs. Bethune and 'The Everlasting,'" says she. "*Aren't* they going it? And for once the fair Bethune is well-gowned."

"Yet I hear she is very hard up at present," says a woman near her. "What eyes she has!"

"I was told she made her own gowns," says another, laughing.

"Pouf!" says Mrs. Chichester. "That's going a trifle too far. One may make the garment that covers one—I'm sure I don't know, but I've heard it—but no one ever made a *gown* except a regular clothes woman—a modiste."

"And, for the matter of that, hers is beautiful. Do you see how the catch at the side of the dress is? It shows the bit of satin lining admirably."

"Well, but how did she get such a charming gown if she is as you say—well, 'hard up'?"

"Ah! To go into a thing like that! How *rude!*" says Mrs. Chichester, going off into a little convulsion of laughter behind her fan.

"Talking of clothes," says Captain Marryatt at the moment, "did you ever see anything like Gillam's get up?"

"Gillam? Is that Mrs. Bethune's partner?"

"Yes. Just look at his trousers, his diamonds! How *can* Mrs. Bethune stand it all?"

"Perhaps she admires it—the diamonds at all events."

"My love in his attire doth show his wit!" quotes Marryatt, who likes to pose as a man of letters.

"When the age is in the wit is out," quotes Gower in his turn, who can never resist the longing to take the wind out of somebody's sails; "and, after all, The Everlasting is not a youth! No doubt his intellect is on the wane."

"He's a cad, poor fellow!" says one the cavalry men from the barracks at Merriton.

"Nonsense!" says the girl with him, a tall, heavy creature. "Why, his father is a baronet."

The cavalry man regards her with pity. How *little* she knows!

"A cad is not always the son of a sweep," says he, giving his information gently; "sometimes—he is the son of a prince."

"Ah! now you are being very funny," says the girl, who thinks he is trying to be clever.

"Yes, really, isn't he?" says Mrs. Chichester, who knows them both; she is a sort of person who always knows everybody. Give her three days in any neighbourhood whatsoever, and she'll post you up in all the affairs of the residents there as well as if she had dwelt amongst them since the beginning of time.

You, who have lived with them for a hundred years, will be nowhere; she'll always be able to tell you something about them you never heard before.

"Isn't he?" says she; she is now regarding the heavy girl with suppressed, but keen, amusement. "And to be funny in this serious age is unpardonable. Don't do it again, Captain Warrender, as you value your life."

"I shan't!" says he. "A second attempt might be fatal!"

"How well Mr. Hescott dances!" goes on Mrs. Chichester, who admires Tom Hescott.

"True. The very worst of us, you see, have *one* good point," says Gower.

"I don't consider Mr. Hescott the worst of you, by a long way," returns she.

"Oh no, neither do I," says a pretty little woman next to her, a bride of a few weeks, who, with her husband, has just come up.

"I have you on my side then, Lady Selton?" says Mrs. Chichester.

Lady Selton nods her reply. She is panting, and fanning herself audibly. Without the slightest ear for music, she has been plunging round the room with her husband, who is still so far infatuated as to half believe she can dance. She is an extremely pretty woman, so one can condone his idiocy.

At this moment Hescott appears. He goes straight to the bride. He has been sent, indeed, by Lady Warbeck.

"Will you give me the pleasure of this dance, Lady Selton?" asks he.

"It? What is it?" nervously.

"A waltz."

He is smiling at her. She has a charming figure. Of course she can dance. Tom Hescott would not have asked the loveliest woman in the land to waltz with him, if he knew her to be a bad dancer.

"I can't waltz at all," says the bride. But her husband comes to the rescue.

"Oh, nonsense!" says he, smilingly. "Hescott dances so well that he will teach you. Go, go with him." He gives her a playful little push towards Hescott, who is looking very blank. "You'll get into it in no time."

"Get into it."

The disgust that is writ so large on Hescott's face, as he leads her away, makes Mrs. Chichester shake with laughter.

"He'll find it a slight difference after Lady Rylton's waltzing," says she to Marryatt.

"He'll find a difference in every way. Lady Selton is devoted to her husband——"

"And Lady Rylton——"

"*Well!*" He hesitates.

"How vague! But I know, I know! By-the-bye," with a swift change of tone that quite deceives him, "which do you admire most?"

"Oh, Lady Rylton, of course. Lady Selton is pretty—in a way—but——"

"Then you prefer the woman who is *not* devoted to her husband?"

"I don't see how that argument comes in," says he quickly. "Some husbands are—are——"

"Quite true. They are indeed," interrupts Mrs. Chichester, who seems to be enjoying herself. "But what an aspersion on poor Sir Maurice."

"I wasn't thinking of him," says Marryatt hurriedly.

"Of whom then?"

She fixes her eyes full on his—eyes merry with mischief.

"Oh, I don't know," says he confusedly.

"Of *my* husband?"

"Mrs. Chichester, I don't think——"

"That's right," says she, rising and slipping her arm into his. "Never think; it's about the most foolish thing anyone can do. I never think. I only wait; waiting is full of promise."

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW RYLTON ASKS HIS WIFE TO TREAD A MEASURE WITH HIM, AND HOW THE FATES WEAVE A LITTLE MESH FOR TITA'S PRETTY FEET.

"Will you give me this dance, Tita?" asks Sir Maurice, going up to his wife.

Tita is standing in a recess near the window. The window is wide open, and filled at each corner with giant ferns in pots.

"Ye—es," says Tita, with hesitation.

"Of course, if you are engaged——"

"That's it, I'm not quite sure."

Rylton laughs unpleasantly.

"Oh, if you want to give it to somebody else——"

"I don't," returns Tita calmly. "You dance better than anyone here, except Tom."

"Perhaps, then, you wish to reserve it for Tom? I see you have already danced a good deal with Tom."

"It is such a pleasure to dance with him," says she enthusiastically.

"One can see how you regard it."

"What do you mean?" looking at him. "Have I danced too much with him? If you imagine——"

"I shouldn't presume to imagine. But this dance, why can't I have it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I've lost my card. I can't think what I have done with it."

"Dropped it, perhaps."

"No; I *fancy*"—frowning as if trying to remember—"that I gave it to somebody to keep for me."

"Tom, perhaps," dryly.

"I think not."

"Well, your partner for this dance, whoever he is, doesn't seem to be in a hurry to claim you," says Rylton, making his rude speech very suavely. "You may as well give it to me."

At this moment Hescott, looking rather out of breath, comes up to them, pushing the curtain near him aside.

"What a place to hide yourself!" says he to Tita. "I have been hunting for you everywhere." Here he catches sight of Rylton. "Oh, you, Rylton! Tita is in good company, at all events."

"She is always in good company, of course," returns Rylton, smiling.

"Why, is it *you*, then, who is my partner?" says Tita, quickly looking at Tom. "Maurice wants me to dance this with him. I told him I should be delighted to, but——"

"Did you tell me that?" interrupts Sir Maurice, always smiling.

"Well, if I didn't say it, I meant it," with a shrug. "But, you see, I had lost my card, so I wasn't sure whether I was engaged to somebody else or not."

"Why——" begins Hescott.

He stops dead short. Suddenly it occurs to him that perhaps she doesn't wish her husband to *know!* He curses himself for this thought afterwards. She—*she* to descend to duplicity of any sort!

"It is you who have my card!" cries Tita suddenly, as if just remembering, and with a merry laugh. "Of course! How could I have forgotten!"

"How, indeed!" says her husband pleasantly; his mouth is looking a little hard, however.

"Give it to me," says Tita.

Hescott gives her the card in silence. If she is ignorant, he, at all events, is quite aware that there is thunder in the atmosphere.

Tita runs her eye down the card.

"Yes, this dance is yours," says she, looking up at Tom.

"If you would prefer to dance it with Sir Maurice——" begins he.

He is looking at her. His heart feels on fire. *Will* she elect to dance with this husband, who, as report goes, so openly prefers another?

"No, no, no!" cries Tita gaily; "I have promised you. Maurice can ask me for another later on."

"Certainly," says Sir Maurice courteously.

He nods and smiles at them as they leave the recess, but once past his view, his expression changes; his brow grows black as night. What does it all mean? Is she as innocent as heaven itself, or as false as hell? All things point the latter way.

First she had said—— What was it she had said? That she didn't know whether she were engaged to this dance or not. A clear putting off—a plan to gain time. She had lost her card; she couldn't imagine how and where. Then comes the inevitable cousin *with* the card. And his hesitation—that was fatal. He surely was clever enough to have avoided that. *She* had known what to do, however; she had taken the bull by the horns. She had given "Tom," as she calls him, a safe lead.

And yet—and yet! Her face comes back to him. Could he accuse that face of falsehood? And another thing: If she and that cousin of hers were in collusion, would they have so openly defied him, as it were?

No; it is out of the question. So far as she goes, at all events, there is nothing to complain of. That she is indifferent to him—her husband—is, of course, beyond question. He himself had arranged all that beforehand—before his marriage. Both he and she were to have a loose rein, and there was to be no call for affection on either side.

His mind runs back to those early days when he had asked Tita to marry him. He had been altogether satisfied with the arrangements then made—arrangements that left him as free as air, and his wife too. He had thought with boredom of this marriage, and had grasped at any alleviation of the martyrdom. And now it is just as he had ordained it. And yet——

Tita has disappeared. Once or twice he had caught a glimpse of her floating round the room with her cousin, but for the past five minutes she has not been *en évidence* at all. Sir Maurice, moving out of the recess, is touched by a hand from behind. He turns.

Marian Bethune, beautiful, more animated than usual, and with her eyes sparkling, smiles up at him.

"How dull you look!" cries she gaily. "Come out here on the balcony and enjoy the moonlight for awhile."

She had been standing out there in the shadow, and had heard and seen what had occurred between Tita and her husband, and later on with Tom Hescott. Rylton follows her. The soft chill of the air outside attracts him. It seems to check all at once the bitter anger that is raging in his heart. It surprises himself that he should be so angry. After all, what is Tita to him? A mere name. And yet——

Outside here the night looks exquisite. Star after star one sees decking the heavens with beauty.

"Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising through the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid."

Such a night is this, delicate, tender, its charms heightened by a soft low wind that sweeps over the gardens and sends a sigh or two to the balconies above.

"Well!" says Mrs. Bethune.

She had led him to the far end of the balcony, where no seats are, and where, therefore, one may be sure of seclusion—for the moment, at all events. She looks up at him. Some pale pink lamps from behind throw a slight radiance on her—not too deep a radiance. They are too far behind for that, but yet enough to soften her, to idealize her, and to render even more delicate the exquisite flesh tints of her face.

She has waited for her answer some time, but is well satisfied that no answer has been forthcoming. Rylton's eyes are resting upon hers, as if surprised at this new fairness of hers. His glance is full of admiration, yet there is something of sadness—of anger in it, too, that annoys her, in spite of her exultation. For whom is the anger—for that little fool he has married? It seems to her an absurd thing that he should cast a thought, even an angry one, upon his wife when she—Marian—is here.

She has been leaning upon the rails of the balcony, and now draws closer to him.

"Why waste a thought on her?" says she in a low tone that is almost a whisper.

"On her! Who?" asks he quickly, and with an evident start.

"Oh!" with a shrug. "If you don't wish to go into it."

"But into what?"

He frowns. He is feeling very irritable still, in spite of his admiration of her beauty.

She makes a little gesture of contempt.

"If you will not acknowledge me as even your friend."

"You!" says he sharply. "You! *Are* you my friend?"

There is a pause. She looks away from him. And then——

"Oh, *more* than that!" cries she in a low but passionate tone. "*Far* more!"

She lays her hand upon her throat, and looks up to heaven. The moonlight, striking upon her as she so stands, makes her fairness even greater.

"Marian! You mean——"

The past rushes in upon him. He has turned to her.

"No! no! It is nothing," says she, with a little laugh that is full of pain. She makes a movement that almost repulses him. "But I am your friend, if nothing else; and the world—the world is beginning to talk about you, Maurice!"

"About me!"

He has drawn back with a sharp pang. She sees that this new idea that touches him, or that little fool (as she has designated Tita in her mind), has destroyed his interest in her for the moment.

"Yes! Be warned in time."

"Who is daring to talk about me?"

"Not about you directly; but about Lady Rylton."

Some strange feeling compels him to put a fresh question for her, though he knows what the answer will be.

"My mother?"

"This is unworthy of you," says Marian slowly. "No; I meant Tita!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW MARIAN FIGHTS FOR MASTERY; AND HOW THE BATTLE GOES; AND HOW CHANCE BEFRIENDS THE ENEMY.

"Tita! You wrong her!" says he. "Why speak of her? You should not; you always disliked her."

"True." She is silent for a moment, looking down into the silent garden. Then she lifts her head, and gazes straight at him. "You know why I disliked her. You must! You—you only. Some instinct from the very first warned me against her. I knew. I *knew* she would rob me of all that life had left me. I knew"—with a quick, long sob—"she would take *you* from me!"

Rylton, who has been leaning on the railings beside her, raises himself, and stands staring at her, a terrible anguish in his eyes.

"Marian—think," says he hoarsely.

"Oh, *why* did you marry her?" cries she, smiting her hands together as if half distracted. "There was always so much time—time!"

"There was none."

"There is always time!" She is silent for a moment, and then, with an increase of passion in her tone, repeats her question: "Why did you marry her?"

"*You*—to ask me that!" exclaims he fiercely.

"It was not like you," says she, interrupting him in a measure, as though unable to keep back the words, the accusations, that are rushing to her lips. "I have known you so long—so long. Ah! I thought I knew you. I believed you faithful. I believed you many things. But, at all events"—with a sad and desolate reproach—"I never believed you fond of money."

"Marian!" She has laid her hand upon his arm, and now he flings it from him. "That *you* should accuse *me*! Money! What was money to me in comparison with your love? But you—you—"

He does not go on: it is so hard to condemn her. He is looking at her in the tender light with eyes that seek to read her heart, and he is very pale. She can see that, in spite of the warm, pink glow of the lamps behind them.

"Well—and I?" questions she, with deep agitation.

How handsome he is! how lovable! Oh for the good sweet past she has so madly flung aside!

"You refused me," says he slowly, "you, on whom my soul was set."

"For your own good," in a stifled voice.

"Don't repeat that wretched formula," exclaims he vehemently. "It means nothing. It was not for my good. It was for my damnation, I think. You see how things are going."

He stops abruptly here, as if thinking of something, and she knows and resents the knowledge that his mind has gone back to Tita—resents it, though his thought has been condemnatory of his wife. Why can't he forget her altogether?

"Yes I meant it for your good," says she, in a whisper.

Her heart is beating wildly.

"You refused me," persists he, in a dull tone. "That is all I remember. You refused me—how many times?"

She turns away from him.

"Once too often, at all events," replies she, in a low, wretched voice.

She makes a movement as if to go back to the lighted rooms beyond, but he catches her and compels her to stay with him.

"What do you mean?" demands he sternly. "To say *that* to me—and now—now, when it is too late."

"Too late, indeed!" echoes she.

Her voice sounds like the voice of one dying. She covers her face with her hands. He knows that she is crying. Very gently he takes down one of the hands and holds it between both his own, and presses it to his lips. How dear she has always been to him! He realizes in this moment how dear she still *is*.

"Marian, have pity on me," says he hoarsely. "I have suffered a great deal. And your tears——"

"My tears! They will avail me nothing," says she bitterly. "When *you* have forsaken me, what is left?"

"*Have* I forsaken you?" He pauses, as if to control the agitation that is threatening to overcome him. "When all I cared for was lost to me," he goes on presently, his eyes upon the ground, "when you had told me that marriage between us was impossible, then one thing remained, and one only—ambition. The old place had been ours for two centuries—it had its claim on me. If love was not to be my portion, I felt I might as well do all I could for the old name—the old place."

"And your wife? Was that honourable towards *her*?" She smiles, but her smile is a sneer. "After all, she would not care," says she. "She carried her point! She has compelled you to raise her from the mud to the sky!"

Rylton draws back suddenly. All at once recollection comes to him. His wife! Yes, Tita *is* his wife, and honour binds him to her. He drops Mrs. Bethune's hand.

"I have been quite honourable," says he coldly. "I arranged matters with her. She knows—she is content to know—that——"

"What?" Mrs. Bethune has felt the change in his manner ever since she mentioned Tita's name. "That you once loved me!"

"No," frowning, "I have not told her that."

"Ah!" cries she, with a sort of passionate relief, "I thank you for that, even though your love for me may now be dead. I thank you for that; and as for your wife, what is she to you?"

"She is my *wife*!" returns he gloomily. "I shall remember that—always!"

"Ah! she will *make* you remember it," cries Marian, with a queer laugh. "I warn you of *that*!"

"You warn me!"

"Yes—yes." She throws out her arms in the moonlight, and laughs again, with a great but cruel delight. "You will see. You don't care for her, she doesn't care for you, and you will see——"

"Marian, take care! I can hear nothing said against my wife, even by you."

"You prefer to hear it, then, from others?" says Mrs. Bethune, leaning back against the railings that overlook the gardens beneath, with a strange smile upon her lips.

"I prefer to believe that there is nothing to hear"—haughtily.

"You can prefer what you like," says she, with a sudden burst of rage; "but hear you shall!"

She takes a step nearer him.

"I shall not," says Rylton firmly, if gently. "She is my wife. I have made her that! I shall remember it."

"And she," says Marian furiously, "what does *she* remember? You may forget all old ties, if you will; but she—does *she* forget?"

"Forget what?"

Mrs. Bethune laughs softly, sweetly, wildly.

"Are you blind? Are you *mad*? Can you see *nothing*?" cries she, her soft, musical voice now a little harsh and strained. "That cousin—have you seen nothing there?"

"You are alluding to Hescott?"

"Yes—to him, and—Tita!"

"Tita?" His brow darkens. "What are you going to say of her?"

"What you"—deliberately—"do not dare to say, although you know it—that she is absolutely depraved!"

"Depraved!"

"There—stand back!" She laughs, a strange laugh. She has shaken herself free from him. "Fancy your taking it like that!" says she. She is laughing still, but panting; the pressure of his hands on her arms is still fresh. "And have you not seen for yourself, then? Is it not open to all the world to see? Is no one talking but *me*? Why, her flirtation with her cousin is common talk."

"Depraved, you said!" He has recovered out of that first wild passion of his, and is now gazing at her with a certain degree of composure. "Depraved! I will not have that word used. She is young—thoughtless—foolish, if you will, but not depraved!"

"You can delude yourself just as long as you like," returns she, shrugging her shoulders, "but, all the same, I warn you. I——"

She stops suddenly; voices and steps, coming nearer, check her words. She draws a little away from Rylton, and, lifting her fan, waves it indolently to and fro. The voice belongs to Minnie Hescott, who, with her partner, has come out to the balcony, and now moves down the steps to the lighted gardens below. Mrs. Bethune would have been glad at the thought that Miss Hescott had not seen her; but there had been one moment when she knew the girl's eyes had penetrated through the dusk where she stood, and had known her.

Not that it mattered much. The Hescott girl was of little consequence at any time. Yet sharp, too! Perhaps, after all, she *is* of consequence. She has gone, however—and it is a mere question whether she had seen her with Sir Maurice or not. Of course, the girl would be on her brother's side, and if the brother is really in love with that little silly fool—and if a divorce was to be thought of—the girl might make herself troublesome.

Mrs. Bethune, leaning over the railings lost in such thoughts, suddenly sees something. She raises herself, and peers more keenly into the soft light below. Yes—yes, *surely!*

But Minnie Hescott, who has gone down the steps into the garden, has seen something too—that fair, fierce face leaning over the balcony! The eyes are following Tita and her brother, Tom Hescott.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW RYLTON MAKES A MOST DISHONOURABLE BET, AND HOW HE REPENTS OF IT; AND HOW, THOUGH HE WOULD HAVE WITHDRAWN FROM IT, HE FINDS HE CANNOT.

"You have said," says Rylton, when the steps have ceased, "that you would warn me about my wife. Of what?"

She shrugs her shoulders.

"Ah, you are so violent—you take things so very unpleasantly—that one is quite afraid to speak."

"You mean something"—sternly. "I apologize to you if I was rough a moment since. I—it was so sudden—I forgot myself, I think."

"To be able to forget is a most excellent thing—at *times*," says she, with a curious smile, her eyes hidden. "If I were you I should cultivate it."

"It?"

"The power to forget—at *times!*"

"Speak," says he. "It is not a moment for sneers. Of what would you warn me?"

"I have told you before, but you took it badly."

"Words—words," says he, frowning.

"Would you have deeds?" She breaks into a low laugh. "Oh, how foolish you are! Why don't you let things go?"

"What did you mean?" persists he icily.

"What a tragic tone!" Her manner is all changed; she is laughing now. "Well, what *did* I mean? That your wife— Stay!" with a little comic uplifting of her beautiful shoulders and an exaggerated show of fear, "do not assault me again. That your wife has shown the bad taste to prefer her cousin—her old lover—to you!"

"As I said, words, mere words," returns he, with a forced smile. "Because she speaks to him, dances with him, is civil to him, as she is civil to all guests——"

"Is she *just as* civil to all her guests?"

"I think so. It is my part to do her justice," says he coldly, "and, I confess, I think her a perfect hostess, if——"

"If?"

"If wanting in a few social matters. As to her cousin, Mr. Hescott—being one of her few relations, she is naturally attentive to him."

"*Very!*"

"And she is——"

"Always with him!" Mrs. Bethune laughs again—always that low, sweet, cruel laughter. "*Could* attention farther go?"

"Always? Surely that is an exaggeration."

Rylton speaks with comparative calmness. It is plain that his one outbreak of passion has horrified himself, and he is determined not to give way to another whatever provocation may lie in his path.

"Is it?" tauntingly. "Come"—gaily—"I will make a bet with you—a fair one, certainly. Of course, I know as little of your wife's movements at present as you do. I could not possibly know more, as I have been here with you all this time."

"Well—your bet?" darkly.

"That she is now with her old—with Mr. Hescott."

"I take it," says he coldly.

Something in his air that is full of anger, of suppressed fury, gives her pause for thought. Her heart sinks. Is she to win or lose in this great game, the game of her life? Why should he look like that, when only the honour of that little upstart is in question?

"Come, then," says she.

She moves impulsively towards the stairs that lead to the garden—an impulsive step that costs her dear.

"But why this way?" asks Rylton. "Why not here?" pointing towards the ballroom. "Or *here?*" contemptuously pointing to a window further on that leads to a conservatory.

For a moment Mrs. Bethune loses herself—only for a moment, however. That first foolish movement that betrayed her knowledge of where Tita really is has to be overcome.

"The dance is over," says she, "and the gardens are exquisitely lit. Lady Warbeck has great taste. After all, Maurice," slipping her hand into his arm, "our bet is a purely imaginary one. We know nothing. And perhaps I have been a little severe; but as it *is* a bet, I am willing to lose it to you. Let us take one turn down this walk that leads to the dahlias, and after that——"

"After that——"

"Why, *you* win, perhaps."

"As you will," says he listlessly.

His heart is still on fire. Not a word passes his lips as they go down the path. His eyes feel strained, hurt; they are staring—staring always towards the end of this path, where a seat is, so hedged round

with creepers that one can scarcely see it. Will she be there? He turns abruptly to his companion.

"I am sick of this," says he; "I shall go no farther."

"But your bet?"

"It is a damnable bet!" exclaims he fiercely. "I ought to be ashamed of myself for having made it. You win it, of course, in a sense, as I decline to go on with it; but, still, I believe that *I* win it in fact."

"You are afraid," says she, with a daring that astonishes even herself.

"I am afraid of forgetting that once I was a gentleman," says he curtly.

"You are afraid of what is in that arbour," returns she mercilessly.

Rylton hesitates. To draw back is to betray disbelief in his wife; to go on is to join in a conspiracy against her. He had started on that conspiracy in a moment of intense passion, but now his very soul revolts from it. And yet if he draws back it will show. . . . It will give this woman beside him the victory over the woman he has married. And then a sudden thought comes to him. Why not go on? Why not put it to be proof? Why not win his wager? Tita is thoughtless; but it would be madness in anyone to think her vile. It was madness in *him* a moment since to dream of her being alone in that small, isolated arbour with Hescott. Much as he may revolt—as he does revolt—from this abominable wager he has entered into, surely it is better to go on with it and bring it to a satisfactory end for Tita than to "cry off," and subject her to scoffs and jeers from her adversary.

"Let us go on," says he quietly. "I shall win my bet. But that is nothing! What really matters is, that I should have entered into such a wager with you or anyone. That is a debt I shall never be able to repay—Lady Rylton."

His tone is bitterly self-condemnatory, but Marian has scarcely caught that. The "Lady Rylton" has struck upon her ears, and hurt her to her heart's core! Oh, that she could destroy—blot out that small usurper!

"You have regained your courage? Come, then," says she, in a low tone that is full of a strange mirth.

He follows her along the grassy path—a path noiseless—until presently, having skirted a few low bushes, he finds himself, with Marian beside him, at the southern side of the arbour.

Marian, laying her hand silently upon his arm, points through the evergreens that veil the seat within; a mocking, triumphant smile is on her lips.

There is no need for any indication on her part, however—Rylton can see for himself. On the low, rustic seat within the arbour is Tita—with Hescott beside her. The two young heads are close together. Tita is whispering to Hescott—something very secret, undoubtedly. Her small face is upturned to his, and very earnest. *His* face.

Rylton never forgets his face!

Tita is speaking—she is smiling—she leans toward her companion; her voice is full of a delicious confidence.

"Well, remember it is a secret—a secret between us."

Rylton draws back as if stabbed. He would have given his soul to hear the end of this terrible beginning—this beginning that, at all events, sounds so terrible to *him*; but the fact that he *is* longing to hear, that he has been listening, makes him cold from head to heel.

He moves away silently. Mrs. Bethune, catching his arm, says quickly:

"You heard—a secret—a secret between those two—you *heard!*"

There is something delirious in her tone—something that speaks of revenge perfected, that through all his agitation is understood by him. He flings her hand aside, and goes swiftly onwards alone into the dense darkness of the trees beyond, damning himself as he goes. A very rage of hatred, of horror of his own conduct, is the first misery that assails him, and after that—

After that he sees only Tita sitting there with Hescott beside her—he whispering to her, and she to him.

He stops in his rapid walk, and pulls himself together: he must have time—time to think, to control

himself, to work it all out.

Things seem to come back to him with a strange clearness. He remembers how Tita had once said to him that she never cared to kiss anyone except—Margaret. Her hesitation returns to him now; was Margaret the name she would have said had not fear, mixed with prudence, prompted her words? He remembers, too, that she had once refused to let *him* kiss her lips—him, her husband! Why? He trembles with rage as he asks himself this question. Was it to keep them sacred for someone else—for that "old lover" of hers, for example?

Who had called him that? Marian, was it not? Old lover!

He had laughed at the name then. That child to have a lover! Why, he had believed she did not know the meaning of the word "love." What a baby she had always seemed to him—a careless, troublesome baby. And now!

Great heavens! Who is to be trusted? Is anyone to be trusted? He had put his faith in Tita; he had thought her wild, perhaps a little unmanageable, but—yes, he had thought her lovable; there had been moments when——

And now it had all come to this, that she had deceived him—is wilfully deceiving him.

He does not even in this, his angry hour, accuse her of more than a well-developed flirtation with her cousin; but that is the beginning of an end that he will put a stop to at once, and for ever. He will show her who is her master. If she cannot respect herself, he will, at all events, take care that she respects his name; she shall not disgrace *that*.

He has hardly known where his feet have taken him, but now he finds himself on a lighted path, with two or three couples coming towards him; evidently they have just left the dancing-room. He has therefore described a circle, and come back to the place from which he started. One of the men passing him looks into his face.

That quick, curious glance brings Rylton to himself. He cannot stay here any longer. He must go back into the house. It will be madness to absent himself. And, after all, is not the whole thing madness? What is this girl to him? A mere name; nothing more.

He mounts the steps leading to the conservatory, and, meeting Minnie Hescott, asks her to dance.

"This is only a supper dance," says she. "I'm engaged for all the rest. But, if you like, I'll take one turn with you. After that you must get me something to eat; I never felt so hungry in all my life."

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW TITA TOLD A SECRET TO TOM HESCOTT IN THE MOONLIGHT; AND HOW HE SOUGHT TO DISCOVER MANY THINGS, AND HOW HE WAS MOST INNOCENTLY BAFFLED.

"Of course, I shall understand that it is a secret," says Tom Hescott.

Both he and Tita are quite unaware of the fact that Rylton and Mrs. Bethune had just been standing behind them. Tita, who had been dancing with Hescott, had led the way to this spot when they came out into the garden.

"Still," says Tita, hesitating, "perhaps I ought not to speak. A secret *is* a secret, you know."

"Yes; everyone knows that," says Hescott.

"Knows what?" sharply.

"About a secret."

"If you're going to be nasty, you shan't know it at all," says Tita.

"I understand you very well. You think no woman can keep a secret."

"Ah! but a man can. Tell me yours."

"Nonsense! A woman is *twice* as good at keeping a secret as a man is. And I can tell you this"—with a

little emphatic shake of her charming head—"that I should not tell *you* anything of this secret, only that you are always calling her names."

"Her? Who?"

"Oh, you know very well."

"Who do I know very well? Not a soul here except you; and, after all, I don't think I know *you* very well."

"Well, if you don't you ought."

"Ought what? Know the mysterious 'her' or you?"

"*Me!*"

Hescott looks at her keenly in the dim light. *Is* she a born coquette, or is she only a sweet child—the sweetest child that earth ever gave forth? Somehow it would have hurt him to find her a coquette.

"Ah! I *don't* know you."

"Tom!" There is a little reproach in her tone. Suddenly she puts out her little slim hand and slips it into his. "As if we weren't brought up together," says she, "just like a brother and sister. You remember the old days, don't you, Tom? when we used to go fishing together, and the cricket——"

"Is it wise to remember?" says Hescott in a low tone.

His heart is beating; his fingers now close on hers.

"I don't know—yes. Yes, I think I like to," says Tita. "Darling pappy! Sometimes it all comes back to me. How happy I was then!"

"And now, Tita, *now!*—are you happy now?" asks he.

His tone is almost violent. The pressure of his hand on hers grows hurtful. Involuntarily she gives a little cry.

"Nonsense! Of course I am happy!" says she petulantly, pulling her hand out of his. "How rough you are, Tom!"

"Did I hurt you?" exclaims he passionately. "Tita, forgive me. To hurt you——"

"There, don't be a fool!" says Tita, laughing. "My fingers are not broken, if that's what you mean. But you certainly are rough: and, after all"—mischievously—"I don't think I shall tell you that secret now."

"You must. I shan't sleep if I don't know it. You said I knew the heroine of it."

"Yes, you do indeed," laughing.

"And that I was always calling her names?"

"True; and I can't bear that, because"—gently—"I love her." She pauses, and goes on again very earnestly: "I love her with all my heart."

"I envy her," says Hescott. "I'm glad this mysterious stranger is a she."

"Why?"

"Oh, no matter; go on. Tell me more. What evil names have I called her?"

"The worst of all. You have called her an old maid—there!"

"Good heavens! what an atrocity! Surely—surely you malign me."

"No, I don't; I heard you. And it was to me, too, you said it."

"What! I called you an old maid!"

"Pouf! No!" laughing gaily. "That's out of your power."

"It is indeed," says Hescott slowly.

He is looking at her, the little, pretty, sweet, lovely thing! If she were a maid to-day, some chance—

some small chance—might have been his.

"Well, I'll tell you about it," says she. She looks round her cautiously, in the funniest little way, as if expecting enemies in the bushes near her. Then she hesitates. "After all, I won't," says she, with the most delightful inconsistency. "It wouldn't be a secret if I did."

"Oh, go on," says Hescott, seeing she is dying to speak. "A secret told to me is as lost as though you had dropped it down a well."

"You must remember first, then, that I should never have told you, only that you seemed to think she *couldn't* get married. It"—hesitating—"it's about Margaret!"

"Miss Knollys!" Hescott stares. "What has she been up to?"

"She has been refusing Colonel Neilson for *years!*" solemnly. "Only this very night she has refused him again; and all because of a silly old attachment to a man she knew when she was quite a girl."

"That must have been some time ago," says Hescott irreverently and unwisely.

"A very *few* years ago," severely. She rises. She is evidently disgusted with him. "Come back to the house," says she. "I am engaged for the next."

"A word," says Tom, rising and following her. He lays a detaining hand upon her soft, little, bare arm. "You blame her—Miss Knollys—for being faithful to an old attachment?"

"Y-es," says Tita slowly, as if thinking, and then again, "Yes!" with decision. "When the old attachment if of no use any longer, and when there is someone else."

"But if there was an old attachment, and"—Hescott's face is a little pale in the moonlight—"and practically—no one else—how then?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, if"—he comes closer to her—"Tita, if you had known a man who loved you before you were married, and if when you did marry—"

"But she didn't marry him at all," interrupts Tita. "He died—or something—I forget what."

"Yes; but think."

"There is nothing to think about. He died—so *stupid* of him; and now she is making one of the nicest men I know miserable, all because she has made up her mind to be wretched for ever! So stupid of *her!*"

"Has it ever occurred to you that there is such a thing as love?" asks Hescott, looking at her with a sudden frown.

"Oh, I've heard of it," with a little shrug of her pretty shoulders; "but I don't believe in it. It's a myth! a fable!"

"And yet"—with an anger that he can hardly hide, seeing her standing there so young, so fair, so debonnair before him—so insensible to the passion for her that is stirring within his heart—"and yet your friend, Miss Knollys, is giving up her life, you say, to the consecration of this myth."

Tita nods.

"Yes; isn't she silly! I *told* you she was very foolish."

"You assure me honestly that you don't believe in love?"

"Not a bit," says Tita. "It's all nonsense! Now come in—I want to dance. And remember—remember, Tom, you have promised not to breathe a word about what I have told you."

"I promise," says Hescott in a slow sort of way; he is thinking.

When they reach the dancing-room they find it, comparatively speaking, empty, save for a few enthusiastic couples who are still careering round it.

"Supper must be on," says Hescott. "Come and have something."

As they enter the supper-room several people look at them. To Rylton, who is standing near Mrs. Bethune, these glances seem full of impertinent inquiry. In reality they mean nothing, except admiration of his wife. To-night Lady Rylton has been pronounced by most of those present the prettiest woman in the room. Hescott pilots his charming companion to a low lounge in a corner of the room, a place at any of the tables being impossible to get. But Rylton decides that he has taken her to that secluded spot to make more conspicuous his flirtation with her; and she—she seems only too ready to help him in his plan.

The fact that he is frowning heavily is conveyed to him by a voice at his elbow.

"*Don't* look so intense—so like a thirteenth-century conspirator!" says Mrs. Bethune. Her eyes are full of laughter and mischief—there is something of triumph in them too. "What does it matter, after all?"

"True." He gives her a brilliant smile in return for her rather mocking one. "Nothing matters—except the present moment. Let us consider it. Are you engaged for this dance?"

"Yes; but I can manage to forget my partner."

"That means?"

"You know very well what it means—what it always meant—in the old days."

Her lips part over her beautiful teeth; now there is no mockery in her smile, only love, and a most exquisite delight.

"Ah, Marian!" says he, in a low tone.

He leads her from the room. Her hand tightens on his arm; he feels the pressure, and now in the ball-room his arm goes round her. She—the woman he had loved for so long—is in his arms; he forgets everything. He has sworn to himself in the last minute or two that he *will* forget. Why, indeed, should he remember?

For the rest of the evening he gives himself up to Marian—devoting himself to her; telling himself he is knowing the old sweet happiness again, but always with a strange unaccountable sting at his heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW TITA LOOKS AT HERSELF IN THE GLASS AND WONDERS; AND HOW SHE DOES HER HAIR IN QUITE A NEW STYLE, AND GOES TO ASK SIR MAURICE WHAT HE THINKS OF IT; AND HOW HE ANSWERS HER.

"You can go to bed, Sarah; I shan't want you. And any other night when I am out so late you must not stop up for me. Do you hear?"

"Oh! But, my lady——"

"Yes, yes, yes; I know," interrupting her gaily. "But I won't have it. Do you think I can't take off my own frocks? You will lose your beauty sleep, and I shall be responsible for it. There, go; I'm all right now."

Tita waves her gaily out of the room. She is indeed in the merriest mood, having enjoyed her evening immensely, and danced to the very last minute. She had been thoroughly sorry when Sir Maurice had told her that she ought to say "Good-night" to her hostess and come home. She had not noticed the coldness of his manner at all, being so disappointed at his suggestion; but she had said "Good-night" at once to old Lady Warbeck, who would have liked her to stay on, having taken a great fancy to her; and as she had come back in a brougham with Margaret and Colonel Neilson and Minnie Hescott, she had not seen her husband since.

Having at last dismissed her maid, who had insisted on waiting to take off her evening dress, Tita sits down before the glass to look at herself (all women like looking at themselves), and to think over her evening.

How well the men danced, especially Tom!—though, after all, not so well as Maurice. What a pity she could not have had that *one* dance with him he had asked her for.

She leans forward, and pulling some hairpins out of her short, curly hair, pushes it into another shape, a little lower down on the neck, to see if that would suit her better. No, it wouldn't.

After all, Maurice *might* have asked her again. He danced a great deal with Mrs. Bethune towards the end of the evening, and how charming he looked when dancing!

She rests her arms—soft, naked arms, round and white as a child's—upon the dressing-table and wonders. Wonders if that old story—the story her mother-in-law had told her of Maurice and Mrs. Bethune—was really true. Maurice did not look like that—like a man who would be dishonest. Oh no! It is not true—that horrid story!

Her eyes light up again; she goes back again to her hair, the arrangement of which, on account of its length, is difficult. She piles it now far up on her head, and sticks little diamond pins into it. She almost laughs aloud. She looks like a Japanese young woman. And it's very pretty, too—she *does* look nice in this way. What a pity nobody can see her! And with this little new white dressing-gown, too! Such a little dream of a thing!

Where's Maurice? Surely he must have come up by this time. Some of the men had gone into the smoking-room on their return; but it is so late—with the dawn breaking; perhaps Maurice *has* come up.

She crosses a little passage and goes to the door leading into his room, and knocks lightly; no answer. She knocks again, more impatiently this time, and as still only silence follows her attempt, she opens the door and steps on tiptoe into the room.

It is lit by two or more lamps, and at the end of it, close to a hanging curtain, stands Maurice in his trousers and shirt, having evidently just flung off his evening coat.

"Oh, here you are!" cries she with open delight. "I was afraid you hadn't come up yet, and I wanted to show myself to you. Look at my hair!" She pulls out the skirts of her dainty loose gown and dances merrily up to him. "Don't I look lovely?" cries she, laughing.

Rylton has turned; he is looking at her; his eyes seem to devour her—more with anger than delight, however. And yet the beauty of her, in spite of him, enters into his heart. How sweet she is, standing there with her loose gown in her pretty uplifted hands, and the lace flounces of her petticoat showing in front! She had not fastened this new delight in robes across her neck, and now the whiteness of her throat and neck vies with the purity of the gown itself.

"He looked on her and found her fair,
For all he had been told."

Yet a very rage of anger against her still grows within his heart.

"What brought you here?" asks he sharply, brutally.

She drops her pretty gown. She looks at him as if astonished.

"Why—because"—she is moving backwards towards the door, her large eyes fixed on him—"because I wanted you to look at me—to see how nice I am."

"Others have looked too," says he. "There, go. Do you think I am a fool?"

At that Tita's old spirit returns to her. She stands still and gives him a quick glance.

"Well, I never thought so till now," says she. She nods at him.
"Good-night."

"No, stop!" says Rylton. "I will have this out with you. You pretend to misunderstand me; but I shall make it clear. Do you think I have not seen your conduct of this evening?"

"Mine?"

"Yes, with your cousin—with Hescott." He draws nearer to her. His eyes are on fire, his face white. "Do you think I saw nothing?"

"I don't know what you saw," says she slowly.

All her lovely mirth has died away, as if killed by a cruel death.

"Don't you?" tauntingly. "Then I will tell you. I saw you"—he pauses as if to watch the changes of her face, to see when fear arises, but none does—"in the arbour"—he pauses again, but again no fear arises

—"with your cousin."

He grows silent, studying her with eager eyes, as if expecting something; but nothing comes of all his scrutiny, except surprise. Surprise, indeed, marks all her charming features.

"Well?" says she, as he stops, as if expecting more.

She waits, indeed, as one at a loss.

"Well?" He repeats the word with a wild mockery. Could there be under heaven another woman so dead to all honesty? Does she dare to think she can deceive him to the end? In what a lovely form the evil can dwell! "Well!" He brings down his hand with a little crash upon the table near her. "I was there—near that arbour. I heard—I heard all."

"Well, I'm sorry," says Tita slowly, colouring faintly.

"Sorry! Is that all? Do you know what it means—what I can do?"

"I don't see that you can do anything," says she, thinking of her revelation to Hescott about Margaret. "It is Colonel Neilson who might do something."

"Neilson?"

"Yes, Colonel Neilson."

"Are you mad?" says Sir Maurice, in a low tone, "to think you can thus deceive me over and over again?"

He draws back from her. Disgust is in his heart. Does she dream that she can pass off Neilson as her lover, instead of Hescott? He draws a sharp breath. How she must love Hescott, to seek thus to shield him, when ruin is waiting for herself!

"I am not mad," says Tita, throwing up her head. "And as to deceiving you—Of course I can see that you are very angry with me for betraying Margaret's secret to Tom; but, then, Tom is a great friend, and when he said something about Margaret's being an old maid, I couldn't bear it any longer. You *know* how I love Margaret!—and I told him all about Colonel Neilson's love for her, and that she *needn't* be an old maid unless she liked. But as to deceiving you——"

Rylton, standing staring at her, feels that it is the truth—the truth only—to which he is listening. Not for a moment does he disbelieve her. Who could, gazing on that small, earnest face? And yet his silence breathes of disbelief to her. She steps backwards, and raises her little hand—a little hand very tightly clenched.

"What! Do you not believe me?" asks she, her eyes blazing.

"I believe you? Yes," returns her quickly. "But there is this——"

"There is this, too," interrupting him passionately. "You accuse me of deception most wrongfully, and I—I accuse you of the worst thing of all, of listening behind my back—of listening deliberately to what was never meant for you to hear."

"I did not listen," says Rylton, who is now very white. "It so chanced that I stood near the arbour; but I heard only one word, and it was about some secret. I came away then. I did not stay."

Tita turns to him with a vehemence that arrests him.

"Who brought you to the arbour?" asks she.

"Brought me?"

"Yes. Who brought you?"

"What do you mean?" asks Rylton, calmly enough, but with a change of colour.

"Ah! you will not betray her, but I know. It was Mrs. Bethune. Now"—she goes nearer to him, her pretty, childish face transformed by grief and anger—"now, confess, it *was!*" She draws back again. "No," says she, sighing disconsolately. "No, of course you would not tell. But I," looking back at him reproachfully, "*I—told you—things.*"

"Many things," returns he coldly—unreasonably angry with her because of her allusion to Mrs. Bethune; "and hardly to your credit. Why should you tell Mr. Hescott your secrets? Why is he to be your

confidant?"

"I have known Tom all my life."

"Nevertheless, I object to him as a special friend for you. I don't think married women should have special friends of the other sex. I object to your confiding in him secrets that you never told to me. You said nothing to me of Margaret's love affairs, although she is my cousin."

"You forget, Maurice. I spoke to you several times, but you never seemed to care. And I should not have told Tom, only he called her an old maid, and that *hurt* me, and I wanted to show him how it was. I love Margaret, and I—I am fond of Tom, and——"

The hesitation, though unmeant, is fatal. Rylton turns upon her furiously.

"It is of no consequence to me whom you love or whom you—*care* for," says he, imitating her hesitation, with a sneer. "What *is* of consequence to me, is your conduct as my wife, and that I object to altogether!"

There is a long pause, and then—

"*My* conduct?" says she slowly. She lifts her hands and runs them softly through her loose hair, and looks at him all the time; so standing, few could vie with her in beauty. She pauses. "And yours?" asks she.

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours! I don't know what you mean about my conduct. But you, you have been dancing all the night with that horrid Mrs. Bethune. Yes!"—letting her hands fall, and coming towards him with a face like a little angry angel—"you may say what you like, but you *have* been dancing all night with her. And she *is* horrid."

This is carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance. There is something in her tone that startles Rylton. Has she heard of that old attachment? His heart grows sick within him. Has it come to this, then? Is there to be concealment—deception on *his* part? Before his marriage he had thought nothing of his love for Marian in so far as it could touch his wife, but now—now, if she knows! But how can she know? And besides——

Here his wrath grows warm again. Even if she does know, how does that affect her own behaviour? Her sin is of her own making. *His* sin— Was it ever a sin? Was it not a true, a loyal love? And when hope of its fulfilment was denied him, when he placed a barrier between it and him, had he not been true to that barrier? Only to-night—to-night when, maddened by the folly of this girl before him—he had let his heart stir again—had given way to the love that had swayed him for two long years and more.

"You forget yourself," says he coldly.

"Oh no, I don't," says Tita, to whom this answer sounds rather overbearing. "Why should I?" She glances at him mischievously from under her long lashes. "I should be the most unselfish person alive if I did that." She hesitates for a moment, and then, "Do you ever forget yourself?" asks she saucily.

She laughs—her little saucy air suits her. She is delighted with herself for having called Mrs. Bethune "horrid," and given him such a delicious tit-for-tat. She looks full of fun and mischief. There is no longer an atom of rancour about her. Rylton, in spite of himself, acknowledges her charm; but what does she mean by this sudden sweetness—this sudden sauciness? Is she holding out the olive-branch to him? If so, he will accept it. After all, he may have wronged her in many ways; and at all events, her faults—her very worst fault—must fall short of crime.

"Sometimes," replies he. He smiles. "I forgot myself just now, perhaps. But you must admit I had provocation. You——"

"Oh, don't begin it all over again," cries she, with delightful *verve*. "Why should you scold me, or I scold you? Scolding is very nasty, like medicine." She makes a little face. "And, you know, before we married we arranged everything."

"Before?"

"Yes, before, of course. Well—good-night!"

"No; don't go. Tell me what it was we arranged before our marriage?"

Rylton has drawn a chair for her towards the fire that is lighting in his grate, and now sinks into

another.

"It's awfully late, isn't it?" says Tita, with a yawn, "but I'll stay a minute or two. Why, what we arranged was, that we should be friends, you and I—eh?"

"Well?"

"Well—that's all. Poke up the fire, and let me see a blaze. Fancy your having a fire so early!"

"Haven't you one?"

"Yes. But then I'm a woman. However, when I see one I want it poked. I want it blazing."

At this Sir Maurice pokes the fire, until it flames well up the chimney.

"Ah! I like that," says Tita. She slips from her chair to the hearthrug—a beautiful white soft Persian one—and sits upon it, as it were, one snowflake on another. "How nice it is!" says she, staring at the sparks roaring up the chimney; "such a companion!" She leans back and rests her head against Rylton's knees. "Now, go on," she says comfortably.

"Go on?"

"Yes. We were saying something about friends. That *we* should be friends all our lives. So we shall be. Eh?"

"I don't know." Rylton bends over her, and, suddenly laying his hand under her chin, lifts her face so that he can see it. "You mean that I shall be your friend, and you mine."

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"You have other friends, however. And I don't like that."

"What! Is one to have only one friend?" She wriggles her face out of his hands, and moving her body as she reclines upon the white rug, so turns herself that she comes face to face with him. "Only one!" says she, smiling. She flings her arms across his knees, and looks up at him.

"Is not one enough?" He is looking at her very earnestly. How lovely she is! What a strange charm lies in her deep eyes! And her smile—

"The smile that rests to play
Upon her lip, foretells
That musical array
Tricks her sweet syllables."

"Oh, it would be a poor world with only one friend," says she, shaking her head.

"You want two?" His brow is darkening again.

"More than that. I want you, and Margaret, and——"

"Hescott?"

It is not so much that she has hesitated as he has not given her time to speak.

"Well, yes—Tom," says she. "He *is* my friend!"

"The best of all?" She is not looking at him now, so does not see the expression in his eyes. He is listening breathlessly for her answer, but she knows nothing. She is gazing idly, happily into the fire.

"At present," says she slowly. Then once again she leans across his knees, and looks up at him. "You know Tom is very fond of me—he loves me, I think."

Here Rylton lays his hands upon her wrists, grasping them hard.

"He loves you. He has told you so?"

"No. Why should he?" He lets her hands go. "I know it. He has loved me so many years; and perhaps—in many years"—she comes closer to him, and putting up one soft little hand, lays it on his cheek, and tries to turn his face to hers—"*you* will love me too!"

Sir Maurice springs to his feet, and, catching her hands, lifts her forcibly to hers.

"There, go," says he, as if choking. "Is that how you speak to *him*?"

"To him?"

She stands back from him—not trembling, but with a terrible wonder in her eyes.

"To Hescott— There—go."

"You think——" says she.

"I think you what you are, a finished coquette." He almost pushes her from him.

Tita puts up her hands as if to warn him off.

"I am sorry I ever came here," says she at last. "I am sorry I ever married you. I shall never forgive this—never!"

"And I," says Rylton. "Have *I* nothing to forgive?"

"Nothing, nothing," passionately. "I came here to-night because I was lonely, and wanted to talk to somebody. I came here to show you my pretty new frock; and how have you received me? You have been *_hateful_* to me. And yet you wonder that I didn't think you my best friend! You are not a friend at all. You can't bear me! If I had gone to Tom, instead of you—to show *him* my frock—do you think he would have treated me like this? No, he—"

"Be silent!" says Sir Maurice. "How *dare* you talk to me like this!" A dark flush has risen to his brow, his nostrils are dilated. Is she mad—to say such things to him? "Go!" says he, pointing imperiously to the door.

"You have said that twice!" returns she in a low tone. A moment her eyes rest on his, in another moment she is gone.

All that is left him is the memory of a little lovely creature, clad in a white gown, who had come to him with merry, happy eyes, and a smile upon her lips—a smile that he had killed!

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW SIR MAURICE FEELS UNEASY; AND HOW TITA, FOR ONCE, SHOWS HERSELF IMPLACABLE, AND REFUSES TO ACCEPT THE OVERTURES OF PEACE. AND HOW A LITTLE GOSSIP WARMS THE AIR.

It is the next day, and luncheon is well over, a somewhat badly-attended meal. But now all have managed to scramble downstairs, and the terrace is full of people who are saying "Good-morning" to each other at four o'clock in the afternoon.

"I never felt so tired in my life," says Mrs. Chichester, subsiding into a lounge chair, and trying to look as if her tea-gown isn't quite new. She has selected this evening in especial to spring it upon her women friends. As a rule people look dowdy after being up all night. Mrs. Chichester is determined *she* won't. She appears as fresh as the proverbial lark, in an exquisite arrangement of white silk and lace, and a heavenly temper. Her eyes are a little greener than usual.

"You don't look it," says Sir Maurice, who is standing near. He is wondering if Tita will come down. Tita has not put in an appearance all day. There had been no necessity to send an apology about her absence from breakfast, as almost every one of the women had taken that meal in her own room, but she *had* sent a word or two of regret about her inability to appear at luncheon, and, somehow, it has got into Sir Maurice's mind that perhaps she has made up her mind to stay in her own rooms all day. The thought makes him uneasy; but at this moment an end is put to it.

There is a little stir on his left, and, looking up, he sees Tita coming towards him down the terrace, stopping at every step to say a word to somebody. Now she stops as she comes to Margaret, and, laying her hands upon her shoulders, kisses her. She is dressed in the simplest little white frock in the world—a frock that makes her look even younger than usual. Her pretty short air is curling all over her head, and her dark gray eyes are *very* dark to-day. Do shadows lie in them, or has she been crying? It is Rylton who, watching her, asks himself this question, and as he asks it a strange pang shoots through his heart. Good heavens! why had he married her? To make her unhappy? He must have been possessed of the devil when he did that deed.

"How pretty you look, Tita!" Margaret whispers to her—Margaret, who has the gift of knowing how to soothe and please. She, too, has her misgivings about those lovely eyes; but all girls like to be told they are pretty, and Tita at once brightens.

"Am I? You are a goose, Madge!" But she presses Margaret's hands fondly for all that as she leaves her.

"Lady Rylton, come and sit here," cries Mrs. Chichester. "I have a lovely chair here for you. It's as soft as—" She cannot find a simile.

"As what?" asks Gower, who delights in annoying Mrs. Chichester.

"As you!" returns she, with a contemptuous glance that fills him with joy.

"Come," says Mrs. Chichester, calling again to Tita, and patting the chair in question. "You look tired. This is a perfect lounge."

"She looks as if she had been crying," says old Miss Gower, frowning at Tita over her glasses.

Again that strange pang contracts Rylton's heart. *Has* she been crying—and because of him?

"Looks! What are looks?" cries Mrs. Chichester gaily. "Looks always belie one."

"Certainly Lady Rylton's must belie *her*," says Mrs. Bethune, with a slow smile. "What cause has she for tears?"

"Not one!" declares Mrs. Chichester with decision. "It would be 'a sinner above all the Galileans' who would make Lady Rylton cry."

Her queer green eyes smile at Tita, who smiles back at her in her little sweet way, and then all at once bursts out laughing. It is a charming laugh, apparently full of mirth. There are only two present who do not quite believe in it, Margaret and Tom Hescott—but these two love her.

As for Rylton, some instinct causes him at this moment to look at Hescott. Tita's cousin is staring at her, his brows met, his lips somewhat compressed. He has forgotten that people may be staring at him in return, maybe measuring his thoughts on this or that. He has forgotten everything, indeed, except Tita's pale, laughing face and dancing, tear-stained eyes.

"Do you see a ghost?" whispers Mrs. Bethune to him, who has been watching him with cruel amusement.

"I don't know," he answers, hardly hearing her. Is not Tita to-day a ghost of her sweet self? And those words, "A sinner above all the Galileans!" *Is* there such a sinner?—and if so, surely it is—

Hescott lifts his eyes to meet those of Rylton. For a moment the two men regard each other steadily, and in that moment know that each hates the other with an undying intensity. Mrs. Bethune, who alone sees the working of the little tragedy, leans back in her chair, and lets her lids fall over her eyes. So still she lies that one might think her sleeping, but she is only battling with a fierce joy that threatens every moment to break its bonds, and declare her secret to the world!

During all this, conversation has been going on. Last night's sayings and doings are on the *tapis*, and everyone is giving his and her experiences. Just now the rather disreputable wife of a decidedly disreputable neighbour is lying on the social dissecting board.

"She gives herself away a good deal, I must say," says Mrs. Chichester, who loves to hear her own voice, and who certainly cannot be called ungenerous on her own account. "The way she dances! And her frock! Good heavens!"

"I hear she makes all her own clothes," says Margaret, who perhaps hopes that this may be one small point in her favour.

Minnie Hescott makes a little *moue*.

"She may possibly make the things that cover her——"

"That *what*?" questions Mr. Gower, resting innocent eyes on hers, but Miss Hescott very properly refuses to hear him.

"It must be a matter for regret to all well-minded people," says Miss Gower, shaking her head until all

her ringlets are set flying, "that when making that hideous dress, she did not add a yard or two, to——" She pauses.

"The what?" asks Mrs. Chichester, leaning forward.

"The *bodice!*" replies Miss Gower severely.

"Oh, auntie!" says her nephew, falling back in his chair and covering his face with his hands. "You shouldn't! You really shouldn't! It's—it's not delicate!"

"What do you mean, Randal?" demands his aunt, with a snort that would have done credit to a war-horse. "To whom are you addressing your remarks? Are you calling *me* indelicate?"

"Oh no—not for worlds!" says Mrs. Chichester, who is choking with laughter, and who only emerges from behind her fan to say this, and go back again. "Who could? But we feared—we thought you were going to say her *skirt.*"

"It is my opinion that you fear nothing," says Miss Gower, with a withering glance at the fan. "And let me tell you that there are *other* people,"—with awful emphasis—"besides Mrs. Tyneway who would do well to put a tucker round their——"

"Ankles!" puts in Mrs. Chichester sweetly.

"No; their——"

"What was her dress made of?" breaks in Margaret hurriedly, who is afraid of their going too far with the irascible old lady.

"Goodness knows! She was all black and blue, at all events!"

"No! You don't say so?" exclaims Mr. Gower, with a tragic gesture. "So her husband has been at it again!"

At this they all roar, as people will, at *anything*, when they have nothing else to do. Even Tita, who, though smiling always, is looking rather depressed, gives way to a merry little laugh. Hearing her, Margaret blesses Randal for his silly old joke.

"Oh, Randal! you are too stupid for anything," says Tita, showing all her pretty teeth.

"You have for once lighted on a solemn truth," puts in Randal's aunt grimly. "Let us hope you are getting sense."

"Or a wise tooth," says Colonel Neilson, with a friendly smile at Tita. "Lady Rylton is very *nearly* old enough to be thinking of that now."

"As for that wretched Mrs. Tyneway," says Miss Gower, taking no notice of him, "if her husband did so far take the law into his own hands as to make her black and blue, I, for one, should not blame him."

"That's funny!" says Mrs. Chichester, giving her a saucy little smile.

"What is funny, may I ask?"

"To hear you defend a man. I thought you despised them in a body."

"I have my own views about them," says Miss Gower, with a sniff. "But I admit they have rights of their own."

"Fancy allowing a man to have rights nowadays!" cries Mrs. Chichester, uplifting her long arms as if in amazement. "Good heavens! What a wife you would have made! Rights?" She looks up suddenly at Captain Marryatt, who is, as usual, hanging over the back of her chair. "Do you think a man has any rights?"

"If you don't, I don't," returns that warrior, with much abasement and perhaps more sense than one would have expected from him.

"Good boy," says she, patting his hand with her fan.

"I suppose husbands have some rights, at all events?" says Sir Maurice.

He says it quite lightly—quite debonnairly, yet he hardly knows why he says it. He had been looking

at Tita, and suddenly she had looked back at him. There was something in the cold expression of her face, something defiant, that had driven him to make this foolish speech.

"Husbands? Pough! They least of all," says Mrs. Chichester, who loves to shock her audience, and now finds Miss Gower ready to her hand.

"Where is your husband now, Mrs. Chichester?" asks Colonel Neilson, quite without *malice prepense*.

Margaret gives him a warning glance, just a little too late. Though indeed, after all, what is there to warn about Mrs. Chichester? She is only one of a thousand flighty young women one meets every day, and though Captain Marryatt's infatuation for her is beyond dispute, still, her infatuation for him has yet to be proved. Margaret had objected to her, in her own mind, as a companion for Tita—Tita, who seems too young to judge for herself in the matter of friendships.

"I don't know, I'm sure," returns Mrs. Chichester, lifting her shoulders. "Miss Gower will tell you; she knows everything. Miss Gower," raising her voice slightly, and compelling that terrible old woman to look at her, "will you tell Colonel Neilson where my husband is now?"

Poor Colonel Neilson! who is beginning to wish that the earth would open and swallow him up.

"It argues ill for you that you should be obliged to ask such a question," says Miss Gower, with a lowering eye.

"Does it? How dreadful!" says Mrs. Chichester. She looks immensely amused. "Do you know I heard the other day that he was married again! It can't be true—can it?"

She appeals once again to Colonel Neilson, as if enjoying his discomfiture, and being willing to add to it through pure mischief. However, she is disappointed this time. Colonel Neilson does not know what to do with her appeal to him, and remains discreetly silent. He can see she is not in earnest.

"At all events, *if* true," says Mrs. Chichester, looking now at Miss Gower, and speaking in a confidential tone, "I am sure John will let me know about it."

"John" is Major Chichester.

Marryatt is leaning now so far over her that he is whispering in her ear.

"Is this—*is* this true?" questions he, in low but vehement tones.

"It—it may be. Who can tell?" returns she, with beautiful hesitation.

She subsides once again behind the invaluable fan. To him she seems to be trembling. To Margaret, who is watching her angrily, she seems to be laughing.

"You have evidently great faith in your husband," says Miss Gower, with what she fondly believes to be the most artful sarcasm.

"Oh, I have—I have!" says Mrs. Chichester, clasping her hands in an enthusiastic fashion.

"And he in you, doubtless?"

"Oh, *such* faith!" with a considerable increase in the enthusiasm.

Miss Gower looks at her over her spectacles. It is an awful look.

"I shall pray for you to-night!" says she, in a piously vindictive tone.

"Oh, thanks! Thanks! How *kind* of you!" says Mrs. Chichester, with extreme pathos.

There is an explosion on her left. Mrs. Chichester looks mournfully in that direction to see the cause of it. There is only Mr. Gower to be seen! He, as usual, is misconducting himself to quite a remarkable degree. He is now, in fact, laughing so hard but so silently that the tears are running down his cheeks. To laugh out loud with his aunt listening, might mean the loss of seven hundred a year to him.

"What's the matter with you? Aren't you well?" asks Mrs. Chichester, in a loud voice, calculated to draw attention to him.

She feels that here is an opportunity given her to pay off old scores.

"Oh, don't," gasps Gower, frantically struggling still with his laughter. "If she hears you, she'll be down on me like a shot. As you are strong, be merciful!"

"Very well; remember you are in my debt," says she, who *au fond* is not ill-natured. At this moment Tita passes down the balcony to where her husband is standing on the top of the steps that lead to the gardens beneath.

As she draws closer to him, he fixes his eyes upon her as if to compel a glance from her in return; but Tita, who is accompanied by Minnie Hescott, does not so much as once let her gaze wander in his direction. She comes nearer—ever nearer, laughing and talking gaily, and passes him, still without recognition of any sort. As her skirt sweeps against him, he speaks.

"Are you going out, Tita?"

It is the first word that has passed between them since last night—since she left his room. A sudden angry determination to *make* her speak to him, induces him now to get before her, and bar her passage to the steps.

"Yes," returns she coldly, graciously, briefly.

She leans back a little, as if to catch up the tail of her white gown—in reality, to avoid looking at him.

"Just here there is shelter," says Rylton, speaking hurriedly, as if to gain time, and keep her from gliding past him. "But outside— And you have a very thin frock on. Shall I get you a shawl?"

"No, thank you."

Her manner is still perfectly gracious, but still she refuses to look at him. The gathering up of her frock is evidently causing her a great deal of trouble.

"Shall I take you out some cushions, then?"

"No, thank you."

She has conquered the frock now, but still she does not look at him. In fact, she turns to Minnie, and, as though forgetful of his presence, murmurs some little thing or other to her.

"If you are going to the gardens," says Rylton, with Heaven knows what intention—perhaps a desire to show her how little he cares for her childish anger, perhaps to bring matters to their worst—to know what she means—"may I come with you?"

Tita gives him a glance—the fleetest; a smile—the briefest.

"*No*, thank you," says she, a faint emphasis upon the "No" being the only change in her even tone.

As she speaks she goes down the steps, Minnie Hescott following her.

END OF VOL. I.

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A NOVEL

BY MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

How a Journey is begun as the Day dies down; and how that Journey ends; and how a great Secret is discovered—the Secret of Tita's Heart

THE HOYDEN.

CHAPTER I.

HOW MINNIE HESCOTT GIVES TITA A HINT; AND LEARNS THAT HINTS MAY BE THROWN AWAY; AND HOW MARGARET'S SOUL IS GRIEVED.

Minnie Hescott, during the time it takes her to go down the terrace steps behind Tita, comes to a resolution. *She will give Tita a hint!* It will be a gift of no mean order, and whether it be well received or not, will always be a gift to be remembered, perhaps with gratitude.

And Minnie, who is strictly practical if nothing else, sees a fair hope of return in her present plan. She likes Tita in her way—likes her perhaps better than she likes most people, and Tita may be useful to her as Sir Maurice Rylton's *wife*. But Tita, dismantled of her honours, would be no help at all, and therefore to keep Tita enthroned is now a very special object with her astute cousin.

In and between all this is Minnie's detestation of Mrs. Bethune, who has occasionally been rude to her in the small ways that make up the sum of life.

Minnie, who is not sensitive, takes the bull by the horns.

"Mrs. Bethune," says she, as they go by a bed of hollyhocks now hastening to their death, "is a friend of yours?"

It is a question.

"Mrs. Bethune!" says Tita, stopping and looking at her as if wondering.

What does she mean?

"Yes," says Minnie pleasantly. "A friend. An old friend!"

"Not an *old* friend," says Tita quietly. "She is a cousin of Maurice's."

"Yes. But not a friend of yours?"

"No," coldly.

"I'm glad of that," says Minnie, with hilarity. "I *hate* old friends, don't you? They always cost one such a lot. They tell one such horrid news about one's self. They do such nasty things. Give me a stranger for choice. And as for Mrs. Bethune, now you have told me she is not a friend of yours, I suppose I may speak freely. Do you know, Tita, I'd keep my eye on her if I were you. You have given me a free hand, so I can tell you what is in my mind. That woman—she means——"

"What?" asks Tita, turning upon her with some haughtiness.

"*Business!*" says Minnie Hescott, with an emphatic nod. "Mischief all through. She's up to mischief of some sort. I tell you what," says Minnie, with her old young look, "you've *got* to keep your eye on her."

"I could never keep my eye on anyone," says Tita, with a sudden, irrepressible little laugh. "And why should I keep my eye on Mrs. Bethune? To tell you a solemn truth, Minnie, I can't bear to look at her. She's beautiful, so they say, but to me she is hideous. Therefore, why should I keep my eye on her? It," with a whimsical little glance, "would hurt me so."

"Nevertheless, you *should!*" says Minnie solemnly. "She's a viper!"

"Vipers are ugly."

"And dangerous."

"Then why look at them?"

"To avoid them—lest they sting you," says Minnie, feeling quite pleased with herself for this flight of fancy.

"You think," says Tita, stopping and looking at her, "that Mrs. Bethune will sting me?"

"I think nothing," says Minnie Hescott, throwing out her hands in an airy fashion; "only, get rid of her—get rid of her, Tita, as soon as ever you can!"

"To get rid of a guest! *No*," says Tita. "She may stay here, and I shall make her welcome for ever——" She pauses and looks full at her cousin. There is great courage and great pride in her look. "For ever!" repeats she.

"There is always a fool somewhere!" says Minnie Hescott, with a sigh. "Well," abandoning the discussion for the present, "let us go for our walk round the garden."

As they pass beneath the balcony, Margaret, who is leaning over it, with Colonel Neilson beside her, makes a little irrepressible movement.

"What is it now?" asks he, who knows every mood of hers.

"Nothing. I was only thinking about Tita."

"A charming subject."

"Oh! *too* charming," says Margaret, with a sigh. "That child troubles me."

"But why? She seems to be getting on all right, in spite of your evil prognostications before her marriage. She and Rylton seem on very good terms."

"Not to-day, at all events," shaking her head.

"No? I confess I did think there was a little rift somewhere."

"Oh yes! There is something," says Margaret somewhat impatiently. "Did you see the poor child's eyes, and her whole air? Her pretty little attempts at unconcern?"

"I thought Rylton looked rather put out, too."

"I didn't look at him. I have no patience with him. It is a mad marriage for any man to make." She

pauses. "I am afraid there was some disagreeableness last night." She hesitates again. Though quite determined never to marry Colonel Neilson or any other man, she permits herself the luxury of retaining Neilson as a confidential friend. "I wish her cousin, Mr. Hescott, was not quite so attentive to her. She is very young, of course, but I don't think she ought to have danced so much with him last night."

"And what of Rylton?" asks the Colonel, pulling the glass out of his eye and sticking it in again in an angry fashion. "Who did *he* dance with?"

"Yes. I saw," sadly.

"Well, why should he complain, then?" says Neilson, who can see the right and the wrong so *much* better because it is not his own case. "To tell you the truth, Margaret, I think Mrs. Bethune should not be here."

"I think that, too. But it appears it was Tita who invited her."

"My dear girl, who else? But there is such a thing as coercion."

"It was the prettiest, the most cordial letter. I read it."

"Then you think she knows nothing of that old affair?"

"Old?" She looks quickly at Neilson. "Do you think it is old—worn out, I mean?"

"No, I don't," says Neilson promptly. "And in my opinion, the sooner Mrs. Bethune terminates her visit the better for everyone."

"What an unhappy marriage!" says Margaret, with a sigh. "All marriages are unhappy, I think."

"Not a bit of it. Most of the married people we know would not separate even were the power given them to do so."

"That is merely because they have grown necessary to each other."

"Well, what is love?" says Neilson, who is always defending his great cause against Margaret's attacks. "Was there ever a lover yet, who did not think the woman he loved necessary to him?"

"It is not the higher form of love," says Margaret, who still dreams of an ideal, born of her first attachment—an ideal that never in this practical world could have been realized, and if it *could*, would have been condemned at once as tiresome to the last degree.

"It is high enough for most people," says Neilson. "Don't grow pessimistic, Margaret. There is a great deal of light and joy and laughter in the world, and I know *no* one so framed to enjoy it as yourself, if only you would give yourself full sway. You condemn marriage, yet how can you speak of it with authority—you who have not tried it?"

"Oh, do, *do* stop," says Margaret, lifting her hand. "You are getting on that—that wretched old tack again."

"So I am. I know it. I shall be on that tack to the end of my life. And I think it so unfair of you to condemn anybody without even a hearing."

"Why, I must," says she, laughing in spite of herself.

"No, you needn't. Marry me, and then give judgment!"

"I shall never marry," says Margaret, with cold decision; then, as if ashamed of her tone, she looks up at him. It is rather a shy look, and makes her even more admirable in the eyes of the man watching her. "*Why* will you persist?" asks she.

"I must. I must."

"It sounds like a doom," says she lightly, though tears are gathering in her eyes. "Don't waste your life. *Don't!*"

"I am not wasting it. I am spending it on you," says the Colonel, who is really a delightful lover.

"Ah! but that is so dreadful—for me!"

"Do I worry you, then?"

"No! no! A thousand times no!" cries she eagerly. "It is only that I must always reproach myself?"

"Why always? Give in, Margaret, and let me change my place from lover to husband."

"It is often a fatal change."

"You mistrust me?"

"You! No, indeed! You least of all. I believe in you from my very soul! Don't think that, Harry. But," impatiently, "why go over it again and again?"

Colonel Neilson turns a solemn face to hers.

"Margaret!" says he. "Are you bent on dying an old maid?"

Miss Knollys flushes; she turns aside.

"What an odious word!" says she.

She walks deliberately into the drawing-room behind her. Neilson still stands leaning over the balcony—a slow and distinctly satisfied smile crosses his features.

CHAPTER II.

HOW TITA COMMITS A GREAT FOLLY, THOUGH LITTLE IS THE SIN THAT LIES THEREIN. AND HOW MARGARET TRIES TO MAKE PEACE, AND WHAT COMES OF IT.

Breakfast is nearly over—an uncomfortable breakfast, with only a host to guide it—the hostess had put in no appearance. This would be nothing if the plea of headache had been urged, but headache had been out of it altogether. In fact, Lady Rylton had gone out riding at eight o'clock with her cousin, Mr. Hescott, and has not yet come back, though the clock points at ten-thirty.

Sir Maurice had made very light of it. He had asked Mrs. Bethune to pour out the tea, and had said that Tita would be back presently. But everyone can see that he is upset and angry, and Margaret, noting it all, feels her heart grow cold within her.

As a fact, Rylton is feeling something more than anger. Something akin to fear. Where is she—the girl he had married, meaning to be true to her if nothing else? He had questioned her maid very casually, very unconcernedly, and she had told him that her mistress had gone out riding this morning about eight o'clock with Mr. Hescott. His questions had been so clever, so altogether without anxiety, that the maid had believed in him, and saw nothing in his words to dwell upon later.

Yet Rylton's heart had seemed to cease beating as she answered him. She had gone riding with Hescott. With Hescott! Will she ever come back?

Tita's face, when she had left him that last night, is before him now. Tita's determination not to accept the olive branch he offered her yesterday is before him too. What if she—

And, in truth, Tita *had* been angry. Her spirit had been roused. His open declaration that he believed her capable of carrying on a flirtation with her cousin had hurt her more than she cared to confess even to herself. It was so silly—so unjust! She—*she!*

And he! What of him? Everything that his mother had told her of his affection for Marian grew, all at once, fresh in her mind. How did he then *dare* to speak to *her* of inconstancy? He—who had been false to her from the very beginning. When he had spoken to her to-day, as she passed him on her way to the garden, she had felt as though she could hardly bring herself to answer him—and always revenge was in her mind. Revenge—to show him how little she cared for his censures.

When, therefore, Hescott during the evening asked her to go for a ride with him before breakfast next morning, she had said yes quickly—so quickly, that Hescott foolishly believed she meant more than a readiness to ride in the early morning. Did she wish to be *with* him? A mad hope made his heart warm.

As for Tita—she thought only of that small revenge. She would go for a ride with Tom, without telling Maurice one word about it. She could easily be back in time for breakfast, and no one, therefore, would be annoyed, except Maurice! It seemed *delightful* to annoy Maurice!

The little revenge hardly seems so delightful now, however, as she springs from her horse, and running into the hall, followed by Hescott, sees by the clock there that it is just half-past ten.

"Oh! you should have *told* me," cries she, most unjustly turning upon Tom.

"Good heavens! How could I? I didn't know myself. I told you I had left my watch on my dressing-table."

"Well, we are in for it now, any way," says she, with a little nervous laugh.

She walks straight to the breakfast-room, and, throwing open the door, goes in.

"I'm so sorry!" says she at once.

She gives a little general, beaming smile all round. Only Margaret can see the nervousness of it. She had taken off her hat in the hall, and her pretty, short air is lying loosely on her forehead. There is a tiny dab of mud on her cheek, close to the eye. It is distinctly becoming, and looks more like a Queen Anne patch than anything else.

All the men rise as she enters, except Rylton, who is reading a letter of such deep importance, evidently, that he seems hardly to note his wife's entrance. Tita beckons to them all to resume their seats.

"I'm dreadfully sorry—dreadfully," says she, in a quick little way.

"I had no idea it was so late. So *good* of you," turning to Mrs. Bethune, who is sitting at the head of the table, "to take my place! You see," looking once again round her, "when I started I did not mean to go so far."

"Ah! that is what so often happens," says Mrs. Bethune, with a queer little glance from under her lids.

There is something so insolent both in her meaning and her voice, that Margaret's face flushes, and she makes a slight movement as if to rise; but Colonel Neilson, who is next her, by a slight gesture restrains her. She looks at Maurice, however, as if wondering why he does not interfere—does not *say* something; but Maurice seems more than ever buried in his letter. Indeed, beyond one brief glance at his wife, he has taken no notice of her.

Margaret's eyes go back to Tita. Everyone is offering her a seat here or there, and she is shaking her head in refusal. Evidently Mrs. Bethune's remark has gone by her, like the wind unheard; it had not been understood.

"Come and sit here, and have a hot cup of coffee," says Captain Marryatt.

"No, thank you. I couldn't really. See how muddy I am," glancing down at her skirt. "It must have rained a great deal last night. Tom and I ran a race, and this is the result. I must go upstairs and change my things."

"Certainly, a change would be desirable in many ways," says old Miss Gower, in her most conscious tone, on which her nephew, who is helping himself to cold pie on the sideboard, turns and looks at her as if he would like to rend her.

"Yes, run away, Tita; I'll be up with you in a moment," says Margaret gently, fondly. "I am afraid you must feel very damp."

"I feel very uncomfortable, any way," says Tita, though without *arrière pensée*. Mrs. Chichester, dropping her handkerchief, gets her laugh over before she picks it up again. Tita moves towards the door, and then looks back. "Maurice," says she, with a courage born of defiance, "will you send me up some breakfast to my room?"

Sir Maurice turns at once to the butler.

"See that breakfast is sent up to Lady Rylton," says he calmly.

A faint colour rises to Tita's forehead. She goes straight to the door. Randal Gower, who is still at the sideboard, hurries to open it for her.

"There's a regular ta-ra-ra waiting for *you*," says he, "in the near bimeby."

Tita gives him an indignant glance as she goes by, which that youth accepts with a beaming smile.

Tita has hardly been in her room twenty minutes, has hardly, indeed, had time to change her clothes, when Margaret knocks at the door.

"May I come in?" asks she.

"Oh! come in. Come in!" cries Tita, who has just dismissed her maid. She runs to Margaret and kisses her on both cheeks. "Good-morning," says she. And then saucily, "You have come to read me a lecture?"

"No. No, indeed," replies Margaret earnestly. She *had* perhaps, but the sight of the child's small, pretty, entreating face has done away with everything condemnatory that was in her mind. Still, there is such a thing as a word in season. "But, Tita dearest," says she, "is it wise, the way you are going on?"

"Ah! I knew I should not escape," says Tita whimsically.

"I am not going to scold you, really," says Margaret, smiling; "but consider, dear child! To begin with —"

"Oh, this is *worse* than I thought," interrupts Tita, covering her face with her hands, and blinking at her through her fingers. "Is it going to be firstly, secondly, thirdly? Come to the thirdly at once."

"Do you know what you want?" says Margaret, who feels fonder of her every moment. "A good *slap*! I shall deliver it some day. But, seriously now, Tita, you ought to have considered your guests, at all events. If you had stayed in your room it would have been nothing—but—"

"But because I stayed in the open air it was *something*!" Tita bursts out laughing. "Oh, isn't it funny?" says she. "It would have been all right if I had had a bad headache. *Either* way they wouldn't have seen me at breakfast, and what it amounts to is, that they are very angry because I hadn't a bad headache."

"No one is angry at all."

"No one?"

"Except Maurice, and surely he has some right on his side. You know your conduct was a little—just a little—er—"

"Rude," says Tita, helping her out. "Well, I know that, and I am sorry to my heart's core, Margaret, if I was rude—*to you!*"

The climax is very sweet. Margaret tells herself that Tita is too much for her. The girl by this time has her arms round her neck.

"Don't mind me," says Margaret, holding the little form closely to her. "Think of yourself, my dearest. As if *I* should misunderstand you! But you should study conventionality a little; you should—"

She breaks off; it almost seems to her that she is preaching deception to this baby.

"Now, I'll tell you," says Tita, leaning back a little from her, and pointing each word by a tap on her shoulder, "I'm not so bad as I *seem*! I really *meant* to be in, in time for breakfast—but Tom—"

"Tom," impatiently, "is a bad adviser!"

"It wasn't his fault, any way. The fact is, I took it into my head to run a race with him. He is always lauding that old horse of his, you know—"

"I don't know. All I do know is, that Mr. Hescott must have had a watch about him."

"Well," triumphantly, "he hadn't. So you don't know anything after all, you darling old Madge! He had forgotten it. He had left it at home! That was just what put us out! Not that *I care*. Well, I was going to tell you about our race. We started for Clumber's Hill—to get there and back again, and all went well until my mare ran away with me!"

"Ran away—"

"Don't look like that. I *love* a horse to run away with me; and there were no sandpits or precipices of any sort; it was a real *good* run away. Oh!" throwing out her arms, "how I enjoyed it!" She pauses. "But I don't think Tom did. He was like an egg when he came up with me. *So white!*"

"Never mind Mr. Hescott, go on."

"Well, that's all. By the time I had the mare well in hand again, we were a good many miles farther from here than we meant to be, and, of course, I was late." She puts Margaret away from her a little, and looks at her. "After all," says she, "why should Maurice be so angry about it? Everyone makes mistakes now and then. I suppose," lightly, "even the immaculate Maurice can make his?"

"No doubt," says Margaret, in a low tone.

Is he not making a mistake now—a dreadful one?

"And, for the matter of that, so can *you*," says Tita audaciously, but so lovingly that no one could be angry with her.

"Don't waste time over me," says Margaret, growing very red, but laughing. "Come back to your naughty little self. Now what are you going to do about this, Tita?"

"Do?"

"Yes. Couldn't you go down and say something pretty to Maurice?"

"Go down—to Maurice? Go and beg his pardon. Is *that* what you mean? No, thank you!"

"But, my dear, he is your husband?"

"Is that all?" Tita tilts her chin airily. "One would think I was his daughter, the way you speak, or his slave! No. I shan't apologize to him, Margaret, is that is what you mean. I'm *hanged* if I do!"

"Tita—my dear!" Margaret looks shocked. "I don't think you ought to use such expressions. You make me very unhappy when you do."

"Do I?" Tita gives her a little sidelong glance, meant to be contrite, but too full of mischief to be anything but incorrigible. "Then *I'm hanged* if I say it again," says she.

"Tita, you will come to grief yet," says Margaret, laughing in spite of herself. "Now to return to our argument. I tell you, you owe Maurice something for this escapade of yours, innocent as it is. Fancy in what an awkward position you placed him with your guests! A man doesn't like to feel awkward; and he is, naturally, a little annoyed with you about it. And——"

"Nonsense!" says Tita; "the guests have nothing to do with it! As if I didn't know! Maurice is just in a bad temper because I have been riding with Tom. He hates poor old Tom. If I had gone riding with Randal or any of the others, and hadn't been in till *luncheon*, he would have said nothing—he would have treated it as a joke, I dare say."

"Well—but, Tita, is there nothing in his objection to Mr. Hescott? You must admit, dearest, that your cousin is a little—well, attentive to you."

"Why, of course he is attentive to me. He is quite like a brother to me."

"Brothers, as a rule, are not so very attentive to their sisters. The fact is, Tita," says Margaret desperately, "that I think—er—that Maurice thinks—that Mr. Hescott is——"

"In love with me? I know that," says Tita, without the faintest embarrassment. "*Isn't* it absurd? Fancy Tom being in love with *me!*"

Margaret tells herself that she could fancy it very easily, but refrains from saying so.

"How do you know he isn't?" asks she slowly.

"Why, if he was, I suppose he would tell me so," says Tita, after which Miss Knollys feels that further argument would be useless.

Suddenly Tita turns to her.

"You think me entirely in the wrong," says she, "and Maurice altogether in the right. But there are things about Maurice I do not understand. Is he true or is he false? I never seem to know. I don't ask much of him—not half as much as he asks of me—and still——"

"What do you mean, Tita?" asks Margaret, a nervous feeling contracting her throat.

Has she heard, then?—does she know?

"I mean that he is unfair to me," says Tita, standing back from Margaret, her eyes lighting. "For one thing, why did he ask Mrs. Bethune to pour out tea this morning in my absence? Was there," petulantly, "no one else to ask?"

"She is his cousin."

"So are you."

"My dear, I am not married."

"More shame on you," says Tita, with the ghost of a smile. "Well, there was Miss Gower!"

"She is not married, either."

"And no shame to anyone." Here Tita, in spite of her wrath, cannot help laughing. "But really, Margaret, the blame should not be entirely on my side. If I have to accuse Maurice——"

"Accuse him! Of what?"

Tita looks full at her.

"You are a good friend," says she; "but his mother told me."

CHAPTER III.

HOW MR. GOWER GROWS DARKLY MYSTERIOUS; AND HOW TITA HEARS OF THE ARRIVAL OF ANOTHER GUEST.

Tita, going down the stairs after her interview with Margaret, meets Randal in the hall below.

"You look rather down on your luck!" says he.

"My looks belie me, then," says she stoutly. "But you—what is the matter with you?"

"Ruin!" says Mr. Gower tragically. "My looks do *not* belie me."

"Good gracious, Randal!"

"Ruin stares me in the face," says he, "look where I will."

"Very rude of it," says Tita, with an irrepressible laugh. "One should never stare people out of countenance. You should speak to Ruin."

"Oh, it's all very fine making a joke of it!" says Mr. Gower, who is, however, laughing too.

"Where are you going now?" asks Tita, as he moves away from her towards the hall door.

"Anywhere—anywhere out of the world," quotes he, with a dismal shake of the head.

"Is it so serious as all that?" cries Tita. "Look here, Randal, wait a moment, can't you? I have a last request to make. If you *are* bent on dying, do it; but do it nicely—be picturesque: something original, and no blood. Promise me there will be no blood!"

"So young, and so untender!" says Gower, gazing at her with deep reproach.

He seems full of quotations.

"But where are you going, really?"

"Out."

He pauses.

"Not out of your mind, I hope?"

"Don't be too sure."

"Well, wait, and I'll go with you," says she, glancing at the stand in the hall where her garden hat is generally to be found.

"Not to-day," says Gower; "you mustn't come with me to-day. I'm going out on business."

"Business!"

Mr. Gower and business seem so very far apart.

"Gruesome business," repeats he, dropping his voice to a whisper. "I'm going with my aunt—'my dear, unmarried aunt.' It's my last chance. I shall do or die to-day, or else"—an afterthought striking him—"*she* will."

"Where are you going with her?"

"I am taking her," says Mr. Gower, looking darkly round him, "for a row on the lake. She says she dotes on lakes. I don't think she will dote on your lake when she returns, if"—with a murderous eye—"she ever does."

"Are you going to drown her?" asks Tita, catching him by the arm.

She is laughing still.

"I hope not—I *hope* not," says Gower gloomily. "Circumstances *may* be favourable. We must pray for the best."

He tears himself away from her with a profound sigh, and she is still standing, laughing in the hall, when the library door opens, and Rylton comes into the hall.

Her laughter dies quickly. Rylton, after a swift, careless glance at her, goes towards the letter-rack and places a letter in it, then goes back to the library. As he reaches the door, however, he hears little running feet behind him.

"Don't go—don't go," says Tita. She has laid one hand upon his arm, and is looking up at him. "You are angry with me, and——"

"Angry? No!"

"You are—you know you are! And you want to scold me, and——"

"You are quite mistaken," says Rylton, shaking off her hand gently, but with decision. "I have no desire whatever to scold you. Why should I?"

He goes past her into the library, but she follows him—a lovely little penitent—with lowered eyes.

"Do scold me!" says she. "I was wrong; and I did it on purpose, too."

"On purpose?"

"Yes," hanging her pretty head; "I did it to annoy you! You were so—so nasty about Tom the other night—do you remember? So I wanted to make you *really mad* this time—just for revenge, you know; but, honestly, I didn't mean to be late for breakfast."

"Didn't you?" drearily.

"No, I didn't; you *must* believe that." She goes nearer to him, and slips her hand through his arm. "Maurice!" whispers she. He makes her no answer. She moves even closer to him, and, leaning her little head against his shoulder, looks up at him. "*Do* scold me!" says she again. The tender, childish voice touches him; it goes home to his heart—the heart that is so full of another. He looks down at her, and, stooping, lays his lips on hers. It can hardly be called a kiss; yet it satisfies *her*, to whom, as yet, kissing means so little. "Now I am forgiven," cries she triumphantly. "Is that your scolding?"

"I told you I couldn't scold you," says he.

As he says this he sighs heavily.

"What a sigh!" She pushes him from her with both hands. "After all, I believe you hate me!"

"No, I don't," says Rylton.

He smiles. After all, why not be friends with her? Had he explained that indifference was the word she should have used for hate, would she be any the wiser?

"No—really?" She has flung herself into a chair, and is looking at him with her hands clasped behind her head. "Well," thoughtfully, "I don't hate you, either. That's a blessing, isn't it?"

"A great one."

He feels a little piqued, however, at the nonchalance of her manner. Why should it occur to her that she might hate him? She has, unknowingly certainly, but unquestionably, blocked his way to the fulfilment of his desires, but he—— He changes colour; is he standing in *her* way, then?

"What was the letter you were reading this morning when I came in?"

"A letter?"

He brings himself back to the present with an effort.

"Yes. It was so interesting," says she, making him a little malicious grimace, "that you could not spare a moment from the reading of it to acknowledge my presence."

"It was from my mother."

"No wonder it was so engrossing," says Tita naughtily. "Well——"

"It isn't well; it is ill," returns he, laughing. "She says she is coming to stay with us for a week or so on her way to Lady Sarah's."

"Why is she coming?"

"For our sins, I suppose. I really don't know any other reason." He casts an anxious glance at her. "I am afraid that you won't care about it."

"Well, I shan't," says Tita frankly; "but if she wants to come, there is nothing more to be said. What *I* am afraid of is that Marian won't like it."

"Marian?"

"Yes, Marian. It struck me that she was not very fond of your mother. Was I right?"

"I could not possibly answer for Marian."

"No?"

"Certainly not."

"Yet I thought," with a swift glance, "that you were the one person in the world who could have told me all about her."

"You were wrong, then. I have known Marian, and—liked her; but I think no human being can answer for another's likes and dislikes."

"Perhaps so." She looks down thoughtfully. "When is your mother coming?"

"To-morrow. I shall run up to town and meet her, and bring her on."

"You will be back to-morrow night?"

"Well, she seems to think so; but I expect she will be tired, and stay in town until next morning. In the meantime," smiling at her, "I leave the house and the guests and everything in your charge."

"How delightful!" cries Tita, clapping her hands.

Rylton turns away.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW TITA'S SOUL AT LAST IS STIRRED; AND HOW HER HAPPINESS IS THREATENED AND HERSELF SET AT NAUGHT; AND HOW MINNIE HESCOTT SPEAKS.

"Such a day to go out on the lake!" says Mrs. Bethune, with a contemptuous curve of her lip. "Really, that old woman must be as mad as she is disagreeable."

"Well, she could hardly be *more* so," says Mrs. Chichester.

They are all in the oriel chamber, the windows of which look upon the lake, and now they can see Randall and Miss Gower rowing apparently in the utmost peace across it.

"She has a perfect passion for boating," says Margaret.

"So I should say. I dare say it seems to her pretty and idyllic."

"Her passions ought to be at a low ebb by this time," says Mrs. Bethune with a sneer. She has suffered many things at the old maid's hands.

"Well, let us pray Randal will bring her home in safety," says Tita, laughing.

"My *dear* Lady Rylton!"

"Heavens—what a prayer!" exclaims Mrs. Chichester.

"Let us say it backwards," says captain Marryatt, which is considered such a wonderful departure for him, such a stroke of wit on his part, that everyone laughs in the most encouraging fashion.

"You'll be a reigning wit yet, if you don't look out," says Mrs. Chichester.

"As you are a reigning toast," responds he, quite fired by the late ovation.

"Oh, goodness!" says Mrs. Chichester, shrugging up her thin shoulders and casting a queer glance round her from under her brows; "let us take him away quickly, before he cuts himself with his own smartness."

"Yes. Come down to the library, it's warmer there," says Tita. She leads the way to the door, and when at it looks back over her shoulder at her husband. "Are you coming, Maurice?"

"In a moment or two. I have a few letters to write first."

"And you?" says Tita, looking at Mrs. Bethune.

"I, too, have some letters to write," returns Marian.

Her tone is quite ordinary, but to the young girl gazing at her there seems something defiant in her eyes and her smile. What is it in the smile—a sort of hateful amusement.

Tita leaves the room. She goes out and down the spiral stairs quite collectedly, to all appearance, yet she is not aware for a moment that Margaret's hand is on her arm. For the first time—the first time in all her young and most innocent life—a sin has touched her soul. She has learned to hate—she as yet does not know why—but she knows she hates Marian Bethune.

As the door closes behind her and her guests, Rylton turns on Marian.

"Why did you say that? Why didn't you go?" says he.

His face is white as death. He cannot account to himself for the agitation that is consuming him.

"Why should I not say what is the truth?" returns she, her beautiful daring eyes full on his. "Why should I go? Does Lady Rylton demand that all her guests should be at her beck and call, morning, noon, and night?"

"She demands nothing," says Rylton.

The terrible truth of what he is saying goes home to him. What has she ever demanded, that poor child, who has given him her fortune, her life? Her little, sweet, half-pathetic face as she looked back at him from the doorway is before him. Her face is often before him now.

"She must be a fool, then," says Marian insolently. She takes a step nearer to him. "Don't let us talk of her. What is she to us?" cries she, in a low fierce tone that speaks of words held back for many days, words that have been scorching her, and must find sound at last. "Maurice! Maurice! how long is this to go on!" She takes a step nearer to him, and then, as if it is impossible to her to hold back any longer,

she flings herself suddenly into his arms. "Maurice, speak to me. My love! My life!" Her words are low, dispirited, broken by little sobs.

Rylton presses her to him. It is an involuntary movement, the action of one who would succour another when in trouble. His face has lost all colour. He is indeed as white as death. He holds her. His arms are round her—round this woman he has loved so long; it is—it must be a supreme moment—and yet—

He lays his hands upon her arms, and putting her gently back from him gazes into her drenched eyes. Those eyes so dear, so lustrous. How often has he looked into them, when,

"Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again!"

"Marian," says he. His tone is tenderness itself, yet there is now a sudden strength in it that astonishes him. *She* had had all the strength in those old days. She had dominated him, subduing him by her beauty, her charm. The charm is there still—he knows that as he gazes into her deep eyes, but is it quite as potent? A year ago would she have been standing before him, looking at him as she is looking now with this ineffable passion in her gaze whilst *he* stood too? No. He would have been at her feet, her slave, her lover, to do with as she would. "Marian, is this wise?"

"Ah! one moment!" entreats she sadly. "It is so seldom I can see you alone, and this blessed chance—will you refuse it? You saw how I dared everything. How I even risked her suspicion. It was because I felt I *should* see—*should* speak with you again."

"You should consider yourself," says he in a dull tone.

He hardly understands himself. Where is the old, wild longing to be with her, when others are away, to hold her in his arms? To kiss her lips—dear willing lips?

"What do I care about myself?" returns she vehemently. Her passion has so carried her with it, that she has failed to see the new wonder in his air, the chill, the lack of warmth, the secret questioning. "Ah, Maurice, forgive me! It is so like you to think of me before yourself. And I know one *must* think. But will it be always so? Is there no chance, no hope—of freedom for you and me? You are rich now, and if—if—"

"Don't," says he, in a choked tone.

He almost pushes her from him, but she clings to him.

"I know—I know," says she. "It is a dishonourable thought, but thoughts will come. And you—" She catches him by both arms, and swaying her little body a little, compels his gaze to meet hers. "They come to you, too," cries she in a low tone, soft as velvet, but quick with fervour. "You, too, long for freedom. Do I not know you, Maurice? Do I not believe in you? You are mine—mine! Oh how I honour you, for your honour to *her*! I think you are the one good man I ever met. If I loved you before your marriage, I love you a thousand times better since. You are mine, and I am yours. And we must wait—wait—but not for long. That girl—"

He releases himself from her by a quick, almost infuriated gesture. At the very instant of his doing so the sound of footsteps coming along the corridor without can be heard. Mrs. Bethune steps quickly to a side-door, and passes noiselessly into a passage that leads her to a back staircase. As she runs along it softly, noiselessly, a great swell of delight lifts her bosom.

He loves her. He loves her still. He had not repulsed her when she had flung herself into his embrace, and this last moment when he had flung her out of it, *that* spoke more than all. He had heard those coming footsteps. He had thought of her—her reputation. That was dear to him. She gains her own room by a circuitous round, breathless, unseen, secure in her belief of her power over him. The insatiable vanity of the woman had prevented her from reading between the lines.

Rylton, detesting himself for the necessity for deception, has just seated himself at a writing-table, when Minnie Hescott enters the room. That astute young woman refrains from a glance round the room.

"Still writing?" says she.

She had told herself when she escaped from the others that she would do a good turn to Tita. She decided upon not caring what Rylton would think of her. Men were more easily appeased than women. She would square him later on, even if her plain speaking offended him now; and, at all events, Tita would be on her side—would acknowledge she had meant kindly towards her, and even if all failed still something would be gained. She would have "been even" with Mrs. Bethune.

Miss Hescott's vocabulary is filled with choice sayings, expressive if scarcely elegant. Beyond her dislike to Mrs. Bethune, personally—she might have conquered that—Minnie is clever—there is always the fact that Mrs. Bethune is poor, and poor people, as Minnie has learned through a hard philosophy, are never of any use at all. Mrs. Bethune, therefore, could never advance her one inch on the road to social success; whereas Tita, though she is a mere nobody in herself, and not of half as good birth as Mrs. Bethune, can be of the utmost use as a propeller.

Tita, by happy circumstances, is the wife of a real live Baronet, and Tita is her cousin. Tita has money, and is very likely to go to town every year in the season, and what more likely than that Tita should take her (Minnie) under her wing next season, present her and marry her? Delightful prospect. Her step is quite buoyant as she approaches Rylton and says:

"Still writing?"

"Yes," returns Rylton leisurely, to whom Minnie is not dear.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to say something to you," says Minnie, who has decided on adopting the unadorned style of conversation, that belongs as a rule to the young—the unsophisticated.

"If I can be of the slightest use to you," says Rylton, wheeling round on his chair, "I shall be delighted." He had knocked off the blotting paper as he turned, and now stoops to pick it up, a moment that Minnie takes to see that he has no letter half begun before him, and no letter finished either, as the rack on the side of the wall testifies. Minnie would have done well as a female detective!

"Oh no—no. On the contrary, I wanted to be of use to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. You mustn't be angry with me," says Minnie, still with the air of the *ingénue* full about her; "but I felt ever since the night before last that I *should* speak to you."

"The night before last!"

Rylton's astonishment is so immense that he can do nothing but repeat her words. And now it must be told that Minnie, who had seen that vindictive look on Mrs. Bethune's face as she went down the terrace steps on the night of Lady Warbeck's dance, and had augured ill from it for Tita and her brother, had cross-examined Tom very cleverly, and had elicited from him the fact that he had heard footsteps behind the arbour where he and somebody—he refused to give the name—had sat that night, and that he—Tom—had glanced round, and had seen and known, but that he had said nothing of it to his companion. A mutual hatred for Mrs. Bethune, born in the breast of Tom as well as in his sister, had alone compelled Tom to declare even this much. Minnie had probed and probed about his companion, as to who she was, but Tom would not speak. Yet he might as well have spoken. Minnie knew!

"Yes, that night at Lady Warbeck's. I know you will think me horrid to say what I am going to say, and really there is nothing—only—I am so fond of Tita."

"It is not horrid of you to say that," says Rylton, smiling.

"No. I know that. But that isn't all. I—am afraid Tita has an enemy in this house."

"Impossible," says Rylton.

He rises, smiling always, but as if to put a termination to the interview.

"No, but listen," says Minnie, who, now she has entered upon her plan, would be difficult to beat. "Do you remember when you and Mrs. Bethune were standing on the balcony at Warbeck Towers—that night?"

Rylton starts, but in a second collects himself.

"Yes," returns he calmly.

He feels it would be madness to deny it.

"Very well," says Minnie, "I was there too, and I went down the steps—to the garden. Your wife went down before me."

Rylton grows suddenly interested. He had seen Minnie go down those steps—but the other!

"Then?" asks he; his tone is breathless.

"Oh, yes—just then," says Minnie, "and that is what I wanted to talk to you about. You and Mrs. Bethune were on the balcony above, and Tita passed just beneath, and I saw Mrs. Bethune lean over for a *second* as it were—it seemed to me a most evil second, and she saw Tita—and her eyes!" Minnie pauses. "Her eyes were awful! I felt frightened for Tita."

"You mean to tell me that Mrs. Bethune *saw* Tita that night passing beneath the balcony?"

The memory of his bet with Marian, that strange bet, so strangely begun, comes back to him—and other things too! He loses himself a little. Once again he is back on that balcony; the lights are low, the stars are over his head. Marian is whispering to him, and all at once she grows silent. He remembers it; she takes a step forward. He remembers that too—a step as though she would have checked something, and then thought better of it.

Is this girl speaking the truth? *Had* Marian seen and then made her bet, and then deliberately drawn him step by step to that accursed arbour? And all so quietly—so secretly—without a thought of pity, of remorse!

No, it is not true! This girl is false— And yet—that quick step Marian had taken; it had somehow, in some queer way, planted itself upon his memory.

Had she seen Tita go by with Hescott? She had called it a fair bet! Was it fair? Was there any truth anywhere? If she had seen them—if she had deliberately led him to spy upon them—

A very rage of anger swells up within his heart, and with it a first doubt—a first suspicion of the honour of her on whom he had set his soul! Perhaps the ground was ready for the sowing.

"Saw her? Yes, indeed," says Minnie, still with the air of childish candour. "It was *because* I saw her that I was so frightened about Tita. Do you know, Sir Maurice,"—most ingenuously this—"I don't think Mrs. Bethune likes Tita."

"Why should you suppose such a thing?" says Rylton. His face is dark and lowering. "Tita seems to me to be a person impossible to dislike."

"Ah, that is what I think," says Minnie. "And it made me the more surprised that Mrs. Bethune should look at her so unkindly. Well," smiling very naturally and pleasantly, "I suppose there is nothing in it. It was only my love for Tita that made me come and tell you what was troubling me."

"Why not tell Tita?"

"Ah, Tita is a little angel," says Minnie Hescott. "I might as well speak to the winds as to her. I tried to tell her, you know, and—"

"And—"

He looked up eagerly.

"And she wouldn't listen. I tell you she is an angel," says Minnie, laughing. She stops. "I suppose it is all nonsense—all my own folly; but I am so fond of Tita, that I felt terrified when I saw Mrs. Bethune look so unkindly at her on the balcony."

"You are sure you were not dreaming?" says Rylton, making an effort, and growing careless once again in his manner.

Minnie Hescott smiles too.

"I never dream," says she.

CHAPTER V.

HOW MISS GOWER GOES FOR A PLEASANT ROW UPON THE LAKE WITH HER NEPHEW; AND HOW SHE ADMIRES THE SKY AND THE WATER; AND HOW PRESENTLY FEAR FALLS ON HER; AND HOW DEATH THREATENS HER; AND HOW BY A MERE SCRATCH OF A PEN SHE REGAINS SHORE AND LIFE.

"How delicious the water looks to-day!" says Miss Gower, gazing at the still lake beneath her with a sentimental eye. The eye is under one of the biggest sun-hats in Christendom. "And the sky," continues Miss Gower, now casting the eye aloft, "is admirably arranged too. What a day for a row, and so late in the season, too!"

"Late, late, so late!" quotes her nephew, in a gloomy tone.

"Nonsense!" sharply; "it is not so very late, after all. And even if it were there would be no necessity for being so lugubrious over it. And permit me to add, Randal, that when you take a lady out for a row, it is in the very worst possible taste to be in low spirits."

"I can't help it," says Mr. Gower, with a groan.

"What's the matter with you?" demands his aunt.

"Ah, no matter—no matter!"

"In debt, as usual, I suppose?" grimly.

"Deeply!" with increasing gloom.

"And you expect me to help you, I suppose?"

"No. I expect nothing. I hope only for one thing," says Mr. Gower, fixing a haggard gaze upon her face.

"If it's a cheque from me," says his aunt sternly, "you will hope a long time."

"I don't think so," sadly.

"What do you mean, sir? Do you think I am a weathercock, to change with every wind? You have had your last cheque from me, Randal. Be sure of that. I shall no longer pander to your wicked ways, your terrible extravagances."

"I didn't mean that. I wished only to convey to you the thought that soon there would be no room for hope left to me."

"Well, there isn't *now!*" says Miss Gower cheerfully, "if you are alluding to me. Row on, Randal; there isn't anything like as good a view from this spot as there is from the lower end!"

"I like the middle of the lake," says Mr. Gower, in a sepulchral tone. As he speaks he draws in both oars, and leaning his arms upon them, looks straight across into her face. It is now neck or nothing, he tells himself, and decides at once it shall be neck. "Aunt," says he, in a low, soft, sad tone—a tone that reduces itself into a freezing whisper, "*Are you prepared to die?*"

"What!" says Miss Gower. She drops the ropes she has been holding and glares at him. "Collect yourself, boy!"

"I entreat you not to waste time over trivialities! I entreat you to answer me, and quickly."

Mr. Gower's voice is now apparently coming from his boots.

"Good gracious, Randal, what do you mean?" cries the spinster, turning very yellow. "Prepared to *die!* Why ask me such a question?"

"Because, dear aunt, your time has come!"

"Randal!" says Miss Gower, trying to rise, "pull me ashore. Do you hear me, sir? Pull me ashore at once. Cease your levity."

"Sit down," says her nephew sadly. "Pray sit down. It comes easier sitting than any other way, I have been told."

"What comes?" Miss Gower casts a wild glance round her. They are far from the shore, and, indeed, even if they had been nearer to it, no help could reach her, as there is not a soul to be seen, and from where they now are not a glimpse of the house is to be had. "Randal, would you murder me?" cries she.

"Oh, dear aunt, what a question!" says Mr. Gower with deep reproach.
"No, far from that. Learn that I, too, am resolved to die!"

"Oh, heavens!" cries Miss Gower, clinging to the sides of the boat. "What brought me out to-day? And to think insanity should break out, in our family here, for the first time! Unhappy youth, bethink yourself! Would you have my death upon your soul?"

Here all at once it occurs to her that she has read somewhere of the power of the human eye. *She* has an eye, and it is human; she will use it! She leans forward and half closes her lids (presumably to

concentrate the rays within), and casts upon Gower a glance that she herself would have designated "fell." The effect is, perhaps, a little destroyed by the fact that her big hat has fallen over her left ear, and that she has put on a diabolic grin—meant to be impressive—that gives all the gold with which the dentist has supplied her, to public view. Quite a little fortune in itself! She speaks.

"How *dare* you!" says she, in a voice meant to be thunder, but which trembles like a jelly. "Take me back at once to the house! What *madness* is this!"

She is frightened when she utters the word "madness." But the present madman does not seem to care about it.

"Not madness, aunt," says he, still with unutterable sadness in look and tone, "but sober, terrible *truth!* Life has ceased to have charms for me. I have therefore resolved to put an end to it!"

"But what of me, Randal!" cries the spinster in an agonized tone.

"I cannot bear to die alone, dear aunt. To leave you to mourn my memory! Such misery I am resolved to spare you. *We—die together!*"

"Randal—Randal, I say, you are out of your mind."

She has forgotten the power of the eye—everything.

"You are right, dear aunt, I *am* out of my mind," says Mr. Gower, with the utmost gentleness. "I am out of my mind with misery! I have, therefore, bored a hole in the bottom of this boat, through which I—sweetly—"am glad to see the water is swiftly coming."

He points gently to where he has removed the plug, and where the water is certainly coming into the boat.

"It is rising, I think," says he softly and very pleasantly.

Miss Gower gives a wild scream.

"Help! help!" yells she. She waves her hands and arms towards the shore, but there is no one there to succour her. "Oh, Randal, the water is coming in—it's wetting my boots. It's getting on to my petticoats! Oh, my goodness! What shall I do?"

Here she picks up most of her garments; nay, all of them, indeed, and steps on to a loose bit of wood lying in the boat.

"Don't look! don't look!" screams she. There is a flicker of something scarlet—a second flicker of something that might be described as white tuckers of white embroidery.

"Look!" says Mr. Gower reproachfully. "What do you take me for? I'd die first. Ah!"—turning modestly aside—"how I have always been maligned!" He sighs. "I'm going to die now," says he. "Go on, aunt," in a melancholy tone. "There is little time to lose. Perfect your arrangements. The water is rising. I admire you. I do, indeed. There is a certain dignity in dying nicely, and without a sound."

"I *won't* die!" cries Miss Gower wildly. "I *won't* be dignified. Ho! there! Help! help!"

She is appealing to the shores on either side, but no help is forthcoming. She turns at last a pale glance on Randal.

"Randal!" cries she, "you say *you* are tired of life. But—I—I'm not!"

"This is folly," says Mr. Gower. "It is born of an hour, filled with a sudden fear. In a few moments you will be yourself again, and will know that you are glad of a chance of escaping from this hateful world that you have been for so many years reviling. Just think! Only yesterday I heard you abusing it, and now in a very few moments you will sink through the quiet waters to a rest this world has never known."

"You are wrong. It is *not* folly," says Miss Gower wildly. "I don't want to die. You do, you say. Die, then! But why sacrifice me? Oh, goodness gracious, Randal, the boat is sinking! I *feel* it. I know it is going down."

"So do I," says Gower, with an unearthly smile. "Pray, aunt, pray!"

"I shan't!" cries Miss Gower. "Oh, you wretched boy! Oh, Randal, what's the matter with the boat?"

"It's settling," says Mr. Gower tragically. "There is time for a last prayer, dear aunt."

Miss Gower gives a wild shriek.

"Forgive me, my beloved aunt," says Mr. Gower, with deep feeling. He is standing up now, and is doing something in the bottom of the boat. "Honour alone has driven me to this deed."

"Honour! Randal! Then it isn't madness. Oh, my dear boy, what is it? Oh," shrieking again to the irresponsible shore, "will no one save us?"

"You can!" says Mr. Gower. "At least you *could*. I fear now it is too late. I gave you a hint about that before, but you scorned my quotation. Therefore, thy death be on thy own head!"

"Oh, it can't be too late yet. You can swim, my dear good Randal. My *dearest* boy! I can help, you say. But how, Randal, is it—*can* it be that the debt you spoke of a while ago has driven you to this?"

"Ay, even to this!" says Mr. Gower in a frenzied tone.

"How much is it, dearest? Not *very* much, eh? Your poor old aunt, you know, is far from rich." As a fact, she hardly knows what to do with her money. "Oh, speak, my dear boy, speak!"

"It is only seven hundred pounds," says Mr. Gower in a voice full of depression. "But rather than ask you to pay it, aunt I would—" He bends downwards.

"Oh, *don't!*" screams Miss Gower. "For Heaven's sake don't make any more holes!"

"Why not?" says Randal. "We all can die but once!"

"But we can live for a long time yet."

"I *can't*," says he. "Honour calls me. Naught is left me but to die."

Here he stands up and begins to beat frantically upon the bottom of the boat, as if to make a fresh hole.

"Oh, darling boy, don't! Seven hundred pounds, is it? If that can save us, you shall have it, Randal, you shall indeed!"

"Is that the truth?" says Gower. He seats himself suddenly upon the seat opposite to her, and with a countenance not one whit the less draped in gloom, pulls from his pocket a cheque-book, a pen, and a tiny little ink case.

"I hardly know if there is yet time," says he, "but if you will sign this, I shall do my best to get back to a life that is apparently dear to you, though not"—mournfully—"to me."

Miss Gower takes the pen, plunges it into the ink, and writes her name. It is not until to-morrow that she remembers that the cheque was drawn out in every way, except for her signature.

"Ah, we may yet reach the shore alive!" says Mr. Gower, in a depressing tone, putting in the plug.

When they reach it, he gives his arm to his aunt, and, in the tenderest fashion, helps her along the short pathway that leads to the house.

In the hall quite a large number of people are assembled, and everyone runs toward them.

"Why, we thought you were lost," says Mrs. Chichester.

"Yes, so we were very nearly," says Mr. Gower, shaking his head and advancing into the hall with the languid airs of one who has just undergone a strange experience.

"But how—how?" They all crowd round him now.

"Poor aunt and I were nearly drowned," says Mr. Gower pathetically. He takes a step forward, and the water drips from his trousers. He looks back at Miss Gower. "Weren't we?" says he.

"But you are dripping!" cries Tita, "whilst Miss Gower seems quite dry. Dear Miss Gower," turning anxiously to that spinster, "I hope you are not wet."

"Ah! she was so nice, so *nice*," says Randal sweetly, "that she wouldn't let me do much for her. But if you will just look under her petticoats I am afraid you will—"

"Randal!" cries Miss Gower indignantly.

After this the spinster is hurried upstairs by many willing hands and is put to bed. Tita, on her way down from seeing her made comfortable, meets Randal redressed and dry and comfortable in the library.

"What does all this mean?" says she. "When you spoke this morning of taking Miss Gower out on the lake I—I did not suspect you of anything—but now——"

"Well, now, you shall hear the truth," says Gower. Whereupon he gives her a graphic account of the scene on the lake.

"I knew she'd take *that* fence," says he. "And I was right; there wasn't even a jib."

"I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself," says Tita indignantly.

"Don't wonder any more. I *am* ashamed of myself. I'm so ashamed that I'm going at once to pay my debts."

"Oh, I like that!"

"Well, I am. I shall give my landlady five pounds out of her account."

"And the account?"

"I really think it must be about seventy or eighty by this time," says Mr. Gower thoughtfully. "However, it doesn't matter about that. She'll be awfully pleased to get the five pounds. One likes five pounds, you know, when one has lost all hope of ever getting it."

"Oh, go away!" says Tita. "You are a *horrid* boy!"

CHAPTER VI.

HOW ALL THE HOUSE PARTY AT OAKDEAN GROW FRIVOLOUS IN THE ABSENCE OF THE LORD AND MASTER; AND HOW MRS. BETHUNE ENCOURAGES A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK; AND HOW, AFTER MANY ESCAPES, TITA IS CAUGHT AT LAST.

"She has gone to bed," says Tita, reappearing in the drawing-room just as the clock strikes nine on the following evening.

"Thank goodness!" says Mrs. Chichester, *sotto voce*, at which Captain Marryatt laughs.

"She is not very ill, I hope?" says Margaret.

"Oh no! A mere headache."

"Bile!" suggests Mr. Gower prettily.

Tita looks angrily at him.

"What a hideous word that is!" says Mrs. Bethune, with a sneer. "It ought to be expunged from every decent dictionary. Fortunately," with a rather insolent glance at Randal, who is so openly a friend of Tita's, "very few people use it—in civilized society."

"And I'm one of them," says the young man, with deep self-gratulation. "I like to be in a minority—so choice, you know; so distinguished! But what, really," turning to Tita, "is the matter with poor, dear old auntie?"

"A chill, I should think," returns Tita severely. Has he forgotten all about yesterday's escapade? "She seemed to me very wet when she got home last evening."

"She was soaking," says Mr. Gower. "She didn't show it much, because when the water was rising in that wretched old boat—really, you know, Maurice ought to put respectable boats on his lake—she pulled up her——"

"Randal!"

"Well, she did!" says Randal, unabashed. "Don't glare at *me*! I didn't pull up anything! I'd nothing to pull up, but she——" Here Mr. Gower gives way to wild mirth. "Oh, if you'd *seen* her!" says he—"such

spindleshanks!"

At this Marryatt gets behind him, draws a silken chair-back over his face, thus mercifully putting an end to his spoken recollections.

"If I were you, Tita, I should order Randal off to bed," says Margaret, who, I regret to say, is laughing. "He has been up quite long enough for a child of his years."

"Well—but, really, what is the matter with Miss Gower?" asks somebody.

"Temper," puts in Mrs. Bethune, with a shrug.

She is leaning back in an easy-chair, feeling and looking distinctly vexed. Maurice is away. This morning he had started for town to meet his mother, and bring her back with him for a short stay at Oakdean. He had gone away directly after breakfast, telling them all he would be home by the evening if possible; but he feared the journey would be too long for his mother, and that probably she would spend the night in town. In the meantime, if anything in the shape of a murder or an elopement should occur, they might telegraph to Claridge's. He had then turned and smiled at Tita.

"I leave them all in your care," he had said.

Was there meaning in his smile—was it a little entreaty to her to be "good" during his absence?

"Well, she's in bed, any way," says Tita; "and the question is, what shall we do now?"

"Dance!" says someone.

But they have been dancing every evening, and there seems nothing very special about that.

"I tell you what," says Tita; "let us have hide-and-peek!"

"Oh, how lovely!" cries Mrs. Chichester, springing to her feet. "What a heavenly suggestion!"

"Yes; two to hunt, and all the rest to hide in couples," says Tom Hescott.

It has occurred to him that he would like to hunt with Tita, or else to hide with her; and it might be managed. Margaret, who happens to be looking at him, makes a slight movement forward.

"Perhaps we should disturb Miss Gower!" says she anxiously.

"Oh no!" says Mrs. Bethune quickly. "Her room is in the north wing. If we confine our game to this part of the house, she can never hear us."

"Still, it seems such a silly thing to do!" says Margaret nervously.

She distrusts Marian where Tita is concerned. Why should she advocate the game—she who is the embodiment of languor itself, to whom any sort of running about would mean discomfort?

"Dear Margaret," says Mrs. Bethune, in a low voice, but a distinct one—one quite loud enough for Colonel Neilson to hear, who is standing near Miss Knollys—"don't give way to it; don't let it conquer you—*too* soon!"

"It?—what?" asks Margaret unconsciously.

"Middle age!" sweetly, and softly always, but with a rapid glance at Neilson. She leans back and smiles, enjoying the quiet blush that, in spite of her, rises to Margaret's cheek. "I feel it coming," says she. "Even *I* feel it. But why encourage it? Why not let these children have their game, without a check from us who are *so* much older?"

"That is not the question," says Margaret coldly, who has now recovered herself. "My thought was that perhaps Maurice might not approve of this most harmless, if perhaps——"

"Frivolous performance. Of course, if you are going to manage Maurice and Maurice's wife," with a strange laugh, "there is no more to be said. But I wish you joy of the last task. And as for Maurice," with a curl of her lips, "*he* is not a prig."

"Well, neither am I, I hope," says Margaret, with perfect temper.

She turns away, Colonel Neilson, who is furious with Mrs. Bethune, following her. As for the latter, she looks after Margaret until she is out of sight, and for once, perhaps, is sorry for her rudeness. She likes Margaret, but she is out of heart to-night and irritable. The absence of Rylton, the coming of her aunt, all tend to disturb her. And Rylton had gone without a word, a look even!—he who always dwelt upon her words, had studied her looks; he had not given her one farewell sign. She had waited to see if he would give one to Tita; but he had not—at least, nothing in particular—nor had Tita run out to the hall to see him off. She had blown him a little kiss from behind the urn, which he had accepted calmly, and that was all!

"Come on," says Randal excitedly; "Miss Hescott and I will hunt the lot of you! But look here, you must all keep to the parts of the house agreed on. I am not going to have my beloved aunt descending upon me in a nightcap and a wrapper!"

"Well, you must give us three minutes," says Tita, "and you mustn't stir until you hear someone cry, 'Coo-ee!' You understand now, Minnie."

"I know! I'll keep him in hand," says Miss Hescott.

"And he mustn't peep," says Mrs. Chichester.

"Good gracious! what a mean thought!" says Mr. Gower, who is already laying plans in his own mind as to how he is to discomfit the hiders, and win laurels for himself as a searcher.

"Well, off we go!" cries Mrs. Chichester, flying out of the room, Captain Marryatt after her.

Hide-and-seek as a game leaves little to be desired. Even Margaret, who had said so much against it, enters into the spirit of it presently, and knows the throes of anguish when the hunter draws nigh her hiding-place, and the glow of joy when she has safely eluded him and flown to the den, without a clutch upon so much as the end of her garments. Indeed, all have given themselves up to the hour and its excitement, except only Marian Bethune, who, whilst entering into the game with apparently all the zest of the others, is ever listening—listening—— He had said he *might* come home to-night. And it is now close on eleven! In ten minutes, if at all, he will be here. If only she could so manage as to——

They are all now standing once more, laughing, talking, in the small drawing-room, preparatory to another start.

"Who'll hunt now?" asks Colonel Neilson, who has been far and away the best pursuer up to this.

"Why not Tita and Mr. Hescott?" says Marian suddenly, vivaciously. She seems to have lost all her indolence. "They have not been hunting once to-night."

"Yes; that is true," says Captain Marryatt.

"I hate hunting and I like hiding," says Tita. "Colonel Neilson, you and Margaret can be our pursuers this time. Come, Tom! come, all of you!"

Mrs. Bethune for a moment frowns, and then a quick light comes back to her eyes. Even *better* so—if Maurice should arrive. She had planned that they—those two, Tita and her cousin—should be together on his arrival, should he come; and now, now they will be *hiding* together in all probability! Oh for Maurice to come now—now!

She has evaded her own partner in the game, and, slipping away unobserved, is standing in one of the windows of the deserted library—a window that opens on the avenue—listening for the sound of horses' hoofs. In five minutes Maurice will be here, if he comes at all to-night, and as yet they have scarcely started on their game of hide-and-seek. She had heard Tita whisper to Mr. Hescott something about the picture-gallery—she had caught the word—a delightful place in semi-darkness, and with huge screens here and there. Oh, if only Tita could be found hiding behind one with Mr. Hescott!

She presses her hot cheek against the pane of the open window, and as she does so she starts. She leans out into the night, and yes—yes, beyond doubt, here is the carriage!

It is rounding the bushes at the corner, and is already in sight. She springs lightly into the hall—now deserted, as all the house party have gone up the stairs to the happy hunting grounds above. All, that is, except Margaret and Colonel Neilson, who are waiting for the "Coo-ee."

Mrs. Bethune had forgotten them, and running lightly through the hall, she opens the door, and steps into the moonlight just as Sir Maurice comes up the steps.

"You!" says he, surprised.

"Yes. I heard you coming." There is a sort of wild delight in her voice. She would have liked to have flung herself into his arms, but the men outside are busy with his portmanteau and other things; and then—his mother—

"Your mother?" asks she, peering into the darkness.

"She has not come. I had a telegram from her at Claridge's. She can't come till next week, so I came back." He pauses, and then, abruptly, "Where is Tita?"

"Tita?" Mrs. Bethune shrugs her shoulders, and a little low laugh escapes her. "She is playing hide-and-peek," says she, "with—her cousin."

"What are you saying?" exclaims Rylton, her manner far more than her words striking cold to his heart. "Do you mean to insinuate—"

"Why, nothing. I insinuate nothing; we have all been playing—"

"All?"

"Yes."

"You and—"

"And everyone else."

"Was there nothing better, then, for you all to do?"

"Many things," coldly. "But your wife started the game. She had doubtless her reasons—"

"Is that another insinuation? But at all events you cannot condemn the game, as you joined in it."

"I could not avoid joining in it. Was *I* to be the one to censure my hostess?"

"Certainly not," sternly. "No one is censuring her. And besides, as you all——" Then, as though the words are torn from him, "Where is she now?"

"In the picture-gallery, behind one of your favourite screens, with Mr. Hescott."

"A graphic description," says he. He almost thrusts her aside, and steps quickly into the hall. Mrs. Bethune, leaning against the wall behind her, breaks into silent, terrible laughter.

At the foot of the stairs Margaret comes quickly to him. His face frightens her.

"Where are you going, Maurice?"

"Upstairs," returns he quite calmly.

"You are going to be angry with Tita," says Margaret suddenly. "I know it! And nothing is true. *Nothing!* What has Marian been saying to you? She"—with the very strangest little burst of passion, from Margaret, the quiet Margaret!—"she has been telling you lies!"

"My dear Margaret!"

"Oh, Maurice, do be led by me!—by *anyone* but her!" says Miss Knollys, holding him, as he would have gone on. "Why can't you see? Are you blind?"

"I really think I must be," returns he with a peculiar smile. "It is only just now I am beginning to open my eyes. My dear, good Margaret!" He lifts her hand from his sleeve and pats it softly. "You are too good for this world. It is you who are blind, really. It will take longer to open your eyes than even mine." He runs lightly past her up the stairs.

Margaret gives a little cry of despair. Colonel Neilson, catching her hand, draws her into a room on the left. The expected "Coo-ee" has been called twice already, but neither Margaret nor Neilson have heard it.

"Marian has done this," says Margaret, in great distress. He has her hand still in his, and now, half unconsciously, she tightens her fingers over his.

"That woman is a perfect devil!" says the Colonel savagely. "She is playing Old Harry with the *régime* here."

"I can't think what she means to be the end of it," says Margaret. "She can't marry him herself, and——"

"She might, you know, if—if—she could manage to prove certain things."

"Oh *no!* I won't believe she is as bad as that," says Margaret with horror. "She has her good points. She has, really, though you will never believe me."

"Never!" says the Colonel stoutly. "The way she behaved to you this evening——"

"To me?" Margaret flushes quickly. The flush makes her charming. She knows quite well to what he is alluding, and she likes him for being indignant with Marian because of it—and yet, if only he *hadn't* alluded to it! It isn't nice to be called middle-aged—though when one is only thirty, one ought to be able to laugh at it—but when one is thirty and unmarried, somehow one never laughs at it.

"To you. Do you think I should have cared much if she had been beastly to anyone else? I tell you, Margaret, I could hardly restrain myself! I had only one great desire at the moment—that she had been a man."

"Ah! But if she had been a man, she wouldn't have said it," says Margaret. There is a little moisture in her eyes.

"No, by Jove! of course not. I'll do my own sex that credit."

"And after all," says Margaret, "why be so angry with her? There was nothing but truth in what she said."

There is something almost pathetic in the way she says this; she does not know it, perhaps, but she is plainly longing for a denial to her own statement.

"I really think you ought to be above this sort of thing," says the Colonel, with such indignation that she is at once comforted; all the effusive words of flattery he could have used could not have been half so satisfactory as this rather rude speech.

"Well, never mind me," says she; "let us think of my dear little girl. My poor Tita! I fear—I fear——" She falters, and breaks down. "I am powerless. I can do nothing to help her; you saw how I failed with him just now. Oh, what shall I do?"

She covers her face with her hands, and tears fall through her fingers.

Neilson, as if distracted by this sad sight, lays his arm gently round her shoulder, and draws her to him.

"Margaret, my darling girl, don't cry about it, whatever you do," entreats he frantically. "Margaret, don't break my heart!"

Miss Knollys' tears cease as suddenly as though an electric battery has been directed at her.

"Nonsense! Don't be foolish! And at *my* age too!" says she indignantly.

She pushes him from her.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW TITA IS "CAUGHT," BUT BY ONE WHOM SHE DID NOT EXPECT; AND HOW SHE PLAYED WITH FIRE FOR A LITTLE BIT; AND HOW FINALLY SHE RAN AWAY.

Rylton, striding upstairs, makes straight for the picture-gallery. It strikes him as he passes along the corridor that leads to it that a most unearthly silence reigns elsewhere, and yet a sort of silence that with difficulty holds back the sound behind it. A strange feeling that every dark corner contains some hidden thing that could at a second's notice spring out upon him oppresses him, and, indeed, such a feeling is not altogether without justification. Many eyes look out at him at these corners as he goes by, and once the deadly silence is broken by a titter, evidently forcibly suppressed! Rylton takes no notice, however. His wrath is still so warm that he thinks of nothing but the picture-gallery, and that screen at

the end of it—where *she*, his wife, is—

Now, there is a screen just inside the entrance to this gallery, and behind it are Minnie Hescott and Mr. Gower. Randal's eyes are sharp, but Minnie's even sharper. They both note, not only Maurice's abrupt entrance, but the expression on his face.

"Do something—quickly," says Minnie, giving Randal a little energetic push that all but overturns the screen.

"Anything! To half my kingdom; but what?" demands Mr. Gower, in a whisper very low, as befits the occasion.

"Tita is down there with Tom," says Miss Hescott, pointing to the far end of the long, dimly-lit gallery. "Do you want to see *murder* done?"

"Not much," says Gower. "But—how am I to prevent it?"

"Don't you know what you must do?" says she energetically. "Those idiots downstairs have forsaken us. Run up the room as quick as you can—past Sir Maurice—and pretend you are the one who is hunting. *I'll* go for Tom. If we make a regular bustle, Sir Maurice won't think so much about our little game as he does now. Did you see his face?"

"I saw fireworks," says Mr. Gower. Then, "I'm off," says he.

He slips out from behind the screen, and galloping up the room comes to the screen very nearly as soon as Rylton. Not soon enough, however. Rylton has turned the corner of it, and found Tita with Tom Hescott crouching behind it, whispering together, and evidently enjoying themselves immensely.

As she sees him, Tita gives a little cry. She had plainly taken him for one of the hunters, and had hoped he would pass by.

"Oh, you!" cries she. "You! Go away. Go *at once!* They'll find us if—"

She waves him frantically from her. He is too angry to see that there is not a vestige of embarrassment in her air.

Here Gower comes up panting.

"Caught!" cries he, making a pounce of Tita.

"Not a bit of it!" says she, springing away from him to the other side of the screen. "And *you*, Randal, you are not hunting. Where's Colonel Neilson? Where's Margaret?"

"They changed," says Mr. Gower mendaciously. "Miss Hescott and I are upon the track; we are the bloodhounds—we," making another grab at her soft gown, "have *got* you!"

"No, you haven't," says Tita, whereupon there ensues a very animated chase round and round the screen, Tita at last finding shelter—of *all* places—behind her husband—behind Maurice, whose face it is quite as well she cannot see.

He makes a movement as if to go, but she catches him, and unless he were to use violence he could hardly get away.

"There now!" says she, addressing Rylton indignantly. "See how you've given us away. You've told him where we were. Don't stir. You mustn't. If you do he'll catch me."

She laughs defiantly at Gower as she says this. Gower could have laughed too. There could, indeed, be hardly anything stranger than the scene as it stands—comedy and tragedy combined. The husband cold, impassive, stern, and over his shoulder the charming face of his little wife peeping—all mirth and fun and gaiety.

"You *must* stay," says she, giving Sir Maurice a little shake. "Why, you've betrayed our hiding-place. You've shown him where we were. It isn't fair, Randal—it isn't indeed—"

"You are caught, any way," says Gower, who would willingly bring the scene to a close.

He can see Maurice's face, she cannot. As for Tom Hescott, his sister has chased him out of the gallery long before this, with a promptitude that does her credit.

"Caught! Not I," says Tita. "Caught, indeed!"

"Certainly you're caught," says Gower, making frantic little dabs at her; but she dances away from him, letting her husband go, and rushing once more behind the unfriendly screen that has done her so bad a turn.

"Certainly I'm *not*," retorts she, nodding her saucy head at him. Slowly and artfully, as she speaks, she moves towards the farther end of the screen, always keeping an eye on her adversary over the top of it until she comes to the far end, when, darting like a little swallow round the corner, she flies down the long, dark gallery. Once only she turns. "*Now* am I caught?" cries she, laughing defiance at Gower.

"Call *that* fair, if you like!" says he, in high disgust.

But she is gone.

* * * * *

The house is quiet again. Gower and Marryatt are still lingering in the smoking-room, but for the rest, they have bidden each other "Good-night" and gone to their rooms.

Tita is sitting before her glass having her hair brushed, when a somewhat loud knock comes to her door. The maid opens it, and Sir Maurice walks in.

"You can go," says he to Sarah, who courtesies and withdraws.

"Oh! it is you," says Tita, springing up.

Her hair has just been brushed for the night, and round her forehead some cloudy ringlets are lying. She had thrown on her dressing-gown—a charming creation of white cashmere, almost covered with lace—without a thought of fastening it, and her young and lovely neck shows through the opening of the laces whiter than its surroundings. Her petticoat—all white lace, too, and caught here and there with tiny knots of pale pink ribbons—is naturally shorter than her gown would be, and shows the dainty little feet beneath them.

"When youth and beauty meet together,
There's worke for breath."

And surely here are youth and beauty met together! Rylton, seeing the sweet combination, draws a long breath.

She advances towards him in the friendliest way, as if delighted.

"I haven't had a word with you," says she. "Hardly one. You just told me your mother had not come, and"—she stops, and breaks into a gay little laugh—"you must forgive me, but what I said to myself was, '*Thank goodness!*' " She covers her eyes with widened fingers, and peeps at him through them. "What I said to you out loud was, 'Oh, I *am* sorry!' Do you remember? Now, am I not a hypocrite?"

At this she takes down her hands from her eyes, and holds them out to him in the prettiest way.

He pushes them savagely from him.

"You are!" says he hoarsely; "and one of the very worst of your kind!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW TITA, HAVING BEEN REPULSED, GROWS ANGRY; AND HOW A VERY PRETTY BATTLE IS FOUGHT OUT; AND HOW TITA GAINS A PRESENT; AND HOW SIR MAURICE LOSES HIS TEMPER.

Her hands drop to her sides. She grows suddenly a little pale. Her eyes widen.

"What is it? What have I done *now*?" asks she.

The "now" has something pathetic in it.

"Done! done!" He is trying to keep down the fury that is possessing him. He had come to speak to her with a fixed determination in his heart not to lose his temper, not to let her have that advantage over

him. He would be calm, judicial, but now—— What is the matter with him now? Seeing her there, so lovely and so sweet, so full of all graciousness—a very flower of beauty—a little thing—

"Light as the foam that flecks the seas,
Fitful as summer's sunset breeze"—

somehow a very *rage* of anger conquers him, and he feels as if he would like to take her and *compel* her to his will. "You have done one thing, at all events," says he. "You have forfeited my trust in you for ever."

"I have?"

"Yes, you! When I left home this morning, what was the last word I said to you? I must have been a fool indeed when I said it. I told you I left our house and our guests in your charge."

"Well?"

"Well?" He checks himself forcibly. Even now, when passion is gathering, he holds himself back. "When I came back what did I see?"

"Our house—*not* in flames, I hope; and our guests—enjoying themselves!" Tita has lifted her head. She allows herself a little smile. Then she turns upon him. "Ah, I told you!" says she. "You want always to find fault with me."

"I want nothing but that my wife should show *some* sort of dignity."

"I see! You should have asked Mrs. Bethune to see after your house—your guests!" says Tita.

She says it very lightly. Her small face has a faint smile upon it. She moves to a large lounging chair, and flings herself into it with charming *abandon*, crosses her lovely naked arms behind her head, and looks up at him with naughty defiance.

"Perhaps you hardly know, Tita, what you are saying," says Rylton slowly.

"Yes, I do. I do indeed. What I do *not* know is, what fault you have to find with me."

"Then learn it at once." His tone is stern. "I object to your playing hide-and-seek with your cousin."

"With my cousin! One would think," says Tita, getting up from her chair and staring at him as if astonished, "that Tom and I had been playing it by *ourselves!*"

"It seemed to me very much like that," says Rylton, his eyes white and cold.

"I know what you mean," says Tita. "And," with open contempt, "I'm sorry for you—you think Tom is in love with me! And you therefore refuse to let me have a single word with him at any time. And why? What does it matter to you, when *you* don't care? When *you* are not in love with me!" Rylton makes a slight movement. "It's a regular dog in the manger business; *you* don't like me, and therefore nobody else must like me. That's what it comes to! And," with a little blaze of wrath, "it is all so absurd, too! If I can't speak to my own cousin, I can't speak to anyone."

"I don't object to your speaking to your cousin," says Rylton; "you can speak to him as much as ever you like. What I object to is your making yourself particular with him—your spending whole *hours* with him."

"Hours! We weren't five seconds behind that screen."

"I am not thinking of the screen now; I am thinking of yesterday morning, when you went out riding with him."

"What! you have not forgotten that yet?" exclaims she, with high scorn. "Why, I thought you had forgiven, and put all that behind you."

"I have not forgotten it. I might have considered it wiser to say nothing more about it, had not your conduct of this evening——"

"Nonsense!" She interrupts him with a saucy little shrug of her shoulders. "And as for *hours*—it wasn't hours, any way."

"You went out with him at eight o'clock——"

"Who told you that?"

"Your maid."

"You asked Sarah?"

"Certainly I did. I had to do something before I asked my guests to sit down to breakfast without their hostess!"

"Well, I don't care who you asked," says Tita mutinously.

"You went out at eight, and you came home late for breakfast at half-past ten."

"I explained all that to you," says Tita, flinging out her hands. "Tom and I went for a race, and of course I didn't think it would take so long, and——"

"I don't suppose," coldly, "you thought at all."

"Certainly I never thought I was going to get a scolding on my return!"

"A scolding! I shouldn't dream of scolding so advanced a person as you," says Rylton—who is scolding with all his might.

"I wonder what you think you are doing now?" says Tita. She pauses and looks at him critically. He returns her gaze. His cold eyes so full of condemnation, his compressed lips that speak of anger hardly kept back, all make a picture that impresses itself upon her mind. Not, alas! in any salutary way. "Well," says she at last, with much deliberation and open, childish vindictiveness, "if you only knew how *ugly* you are when you look like that, you would never do it again!" She nods her head. "*There!*" says she.

It is so unexpected, so utterly undignified, that it takes all the dignity out of Rylton on the spot. It suddenly occurs to him that it is no good to be angry with her. What is she? A mere naughty child—or ——

"You do not know who you are like!" continues she.

Rylton shakes his head; he is afraid to speak—a sudden wild desire to laugh is oppressing him.

"You are the image of Uncle George," says she, with such wicked spite that a smile parts his lips.

"Oh! you can laugh if you like," says she, "but you *are*, for all that. You're *worse* than him," her anger growing because of that smile. "I never——"

"Never what?"

"I never met such a *cross cat* in my life!" says Lady Rylton, turning her back on him.

"It's well to be unique in one's own line," says he grimly.

A short laugh breaks from him. How absurd she is! A regular little spitfire; yet what a pretty one. His heart is full of sadness, yet he cannot keep back that laugh. He hardly knows how he has so much mirth left in him, but the laugh sounds through the room and drives Tita to frenzy.

"Oh, you can laugh!" cries she, turning upon him. "You can laugh when—when——" She makes a frantic little gesture that flings open the loose gown she wears, and shows once again her charming neck; words seem to fail her. "Oh! I should like to *shake* you," says she at last.

"Would you?" said Rylton. His laughter has come to an end. "And you. What do you think I should like to do with you?"

He looks at her.

"Oh! I know. It is not difficult to answer," with a contemptuous glance from under the long, soft lashes, beneath which his glance sinks into insignificance. "You would like to *give me away!*"

There is a pause.

It is on Rylton's tongue to say she has given *herself* away very considerably of late, but he abstains from saying so—with difficulty, however!

"No, I should not," says Rylton gravely.

"*No?* Is that the truth?" She bites her lips. "After all," with angry tearfulness, "I dare say it is. I

believe you would rather keep me here for ever—just to be able to worry the life out of me day by day."

"You have a high opinion of me!"

Rylton is white now with rage.

"You are wrong there; I have the worst opinion of you; I think you a tyrant—a perfect *Nero!*"

Suddenly she lifts her pretty hands and covers her face with them. She bursts into tears.

"And you *promised* you would never be unkind to me!" sobs she.

"Unkind! Good heavens!" says Rylton, distractedly. *Who* is unkind? Is it he or she? Who is in fault?

"At all events you pretended to be fond of me."

"I never pretend anything," says Rylton, whose soul seems torn in twain.

"You did," cries Tita wildly. "You *did*." She brushes her tears aside, and looks up at him—her small, delicate face flushed—her eyes on fire! "You promised you would be kind to me."

"I promised nothing," in a dull sort of way. He feels crushed, unable to move. "It was you who arranged everything; I was to go my way, and you yours."

"It was liberal, at all events."

"And useless!" There is a prophetic note in his voice. "As you would have gone your way, whether or no."

"And you, yours!"

"I don't know about that. But your way—where does that lead? Now, look here, Tita,"—he takes a step towards her—"you are bent on following that way. But mark my words, bad will come of it."

"Nothing bad will come of *my* way!" says Tita distinctly.

Her eyes are fixed on his. For a full minute they regard each other silently. How much does she know? Rylton's very soul seems harassed with this question. That old story! A shock runs through him as he says those last words to himself. *Is* it old? That story? *Marian!* What is she to him now?

"As for Tom," says Tita suddenly, "I tell you distinctly I shall not give him up."

"Give him up!" The phrase grates upon his ear. "What do you mean?" demands he, his anger all aflame again.

"That I shall not insult him, or be cold to him, to please you or anybody."

"Is that your decision? Then I think it will be wise of your cousin to shorten his visit."

"Do you mean by that that you are going to be uncivil to him?"

"Yes!" shortly, and with decision.

"You will be cold to him? To Tom? To my own cousin? Maurice, Maurice! Think what you are doing!"

She has come close up to him. Her charming face is uplifted to his.

"Think what *you* are doing," returns he hoarsely. He catches her hands. "If you will swear to me that he is nothing to you—nothing——"

"He is my cousin," says Tita, who hardly understands.

"Oh!" He almost flings her from him. "There—let it be as you will," says he bitterly. "It is you cousin—your house."

Tita grows very pale.

"That is ungenerous," says she.

"I have all the faults, naturally." He goes towards the door, and then suddenly comes back and flings

something upon the table before her. "You once told me you were fond of rings," says he.

The case has flown open, because of his passionate throwing of it, and an exquisite diamond and pearl ring lies displayed. Tita springs to her feet.

"Oh, wait! *Don't* go! Oh, *do* stop!" cries she, in great distress. "*Fancy* your thinking of me when you were in town! And what a lovely, *lovely* ring! Oh! Maurice—I'm sorry. I am indeed!"

She holds out her hands to him. Rylton, still standing on the threshold of the door, looks back at her.

Is it an apology? An admission that she has been wrong in her dealings with her cousin? An open declaration that this night's undignified proceedings are really being repented of?

He comes slowly back to her.

"If you are sorry——" begins he.

"Oh, I am indeed. And you must let me kiss you for this darling ring. I know you *hate* me to kiss you—but," she flings her arms round him, "I really *must* do it now."

Instinctively his arms close round her. With a thoroughly astonished air, however, she wriggles herself free, and draws back from him.

"You have done your part beautifully," says she, with a little soft grimace. "You bore up wonderfully. I'll let you off next time as a consideration."

"I don't want to be let off," says Rylton.

"There, that will do," lifting her hand. "And I *am* sorry—remember that."

"If you are," says he, "you will promise me—not to——"

He has grown quite serious again. He hardly knows how to put it into words, and therefore hesitates; but if only she will cease from her encouragement of her cousin——

"Oh no—never. I shall never do it again," says she earnestly. "It was so—so—dreadful of me——"

"If you see it now, I wonder you didn't see it then," says Rylton, a little stiffly; this sudden conversion brings all the past back to him.

"Well, but I didn't see it then—I always talk too fast."

She hangs her pretty head.

"I don't remember what you *said*," says Rylton, a little at fault. "But—if you are honestly determined, Tita, to be—er—a little more circumspect in that direction in future——"

"I am—I am indeed!" cries Tita. "I'm sure I can't think how I ever said it to you! It was so rude—so horrid——"

"Said? *What?*" demands Rylton, with quick suspicion.

"Well, you know I did call you a *cross cat*!" says his wife, with a little slide glance at him, and a tremulous smile, and withal such lovely penitence, that if he had not been led astray by another thought, he would have granted her absolution for all her sins, here and hereafter, on the spot.

As it is, his wrath grows once more hot within him; so she is not sorry after all.

"Pshaw!" says he.

"Oh, and I called you ugly, too!" cries Tita. "Oh, how *could* I? But you will forgive me, won't you?" She runs after him, and lays her hand upon his arm. "You do forgive me, don't you?"

"*No!*" says he violently.

He almost flings her from him.

"Hypocrite!" he says to himself, as he fastens the door of his own room.

A baby's face, and the heart of a liar! She had played with him; she had fooled him; she had, at all events, refused to say she regretted her conduct with her cousin.

He goes down to the garden, feeling it impossible to sleep just now, and, coming back two hours later, finds the ring he had given her lying on his dressing-table. There is no note with it—not even a single line.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW MRS. BETHUNE IS BROUGHT BEFORE THE BAR; AND HOW SHE GIVES HER EVIDENCE AGAINST TITA; AND HOW MAURICE'S MOTHER DESIRES AN INTERVIEW WITH MAURICE'S WIFE.

"And now for the news," says the elder Lady Rylton, next morning, leaning back in her chair; she objects to the word "Dowager."

Contrary to all expectations, she had arrived to-day at half-past eight, and is now, at one o'clock, sitting in her room with Mrs. Bethune before her. She had seen Tita, of course; but only for a moment or so, as she had been in a hurry to get to her bedroom and her maid, and have the ravages that travel had laid upon her old-young face obliterated. She had, indeed, been furious (secretly) with Tita for having come out of her room to bid her welcome—such bad taste, obtruding one's self upon a person in the early hours of the morning, when one has only just left a train. But what *can* one expect from a plebeian!

"News?" says Marian, lifting her brows.

"Well," testily, "I suppose there is some! How is the *ménage* going on? How is it being managed, eh? You have a tongue, my dear—speak! I suppose you can tell me something!"

"Something! Yes."

"What does that mean?"

"A great deal," says Mrs. Bethune.

"Then you can tell me a great deal. Begin—begin!" says Lady Rylton, waving her hand in her airiest style. "I guessed as much! I always hated that girl! Well—and so—— *Do go on!*"

"I hardly know what you expect me to say," says Mrs. Bethune coldly, and with a hatred very badly suppressed.

"You know perfectly well," says her aunt. "I wish to know how Maurice and his wife are getting on."

"How can I answer that?" says Marian, turning upon her like one brought to bay.

It is *too* bitter to her, this cross-examination; it savours of a servitude that she must either endure or—starve!

"It is quite simple," says Lady Rylton. She looks at Marian with a certain delight in her eyes—the delight that tyrants know. She has this creature at her heels, and she will drag her to her death. "I am waiting," says she. "My good girl, why *don't* you answer? What of Maurice and his wife?"

"They are not on good terms, I think," says Mrs. Bethune sullenly.

"No? And whose fault is that?" Lady Rylton catches the tip of Marian's gown, and draws her to her. When she has made her turn, so that she can study and gloat over the rapid changes of her face, she says, "Yours?" in a light, questioning way.

She smiles as she asks her question—a hateful smile. There is something in it almost devilish—a compelling of the woman before her to remember days that *should* be dead, and a secret that should have been hers alone.

"Not mine, certainly," says Marian, clearing her throat as though it is a little dry, but otherwise defying the scrutiny of the other.

"And yet you say they are not on good terms!" Lady Rylton pauses as if thinking, and then goes on. "No wonder, too," says she, with a shrug. "Two people with two such tempers!"

"Has Tita a temper?" asks Marian indifferently.

Lady Rylton regards her curiously.

"Have you not found that out yet?" asks she.

"No," coldly.

"It argues badly for you," says her aunt, with a small, malicious smile. "She has shown you none of it, then?"

"None," distinctly.

"My dear Marian, I am afraid Maurice is proving false," says Lady Rylton, leaning back in her chair, and giving way to soft, delicate mirth—the mirth that suits her Dresden china sort of beauty. "Evidently our dear Tita is not *afraid* of you."

"You take a wrong reading of it, perhaps," says Mrs. Bethune, who is now, in spite of all her efforts to be emotionless, a little pale. "She is simply so indifferent to Maurice, that she does not care whom he likes or dislikes—with whom he spends—or wastes his time. Or with whom he——"

"Flirts?" puts in Lady Rylton, lifting her brows; there is most insolent meaning in her tone.

For the first time Mrs. Bethune loses herself; she turns upon her aunt, her eyes flashing.

"Maurice does not flirt with me," says she.

It seems horrible—*horrible*, that thought. Maurice—his love—it surely is hers! And to talk of it as a mere flirtation! Oh *no!* Her very soul seems to sink within her.

"My good child, who was speaking of you?" says Lady Rylton, with a burst of amusement. "You should control yourself, my dear Marian. To give yourself away like that is to suffer defeat at any moment. One would think you were a girl in your first season, instead of being a mature married woman. Well, and if not with you, with whom does Maurice flirt?"

"With no one." Marian has so far commanded herself as to be able now to speak collectedly. "If you will keep to the word 'flirtation,' you must think of Tita, though perhaps 'flirtation' is too mild a word to ——"

"Tita!"

Tita's mother-in-law grows immediately interested.

"Yes, Tita. What I was going to say when you interrupted me was, that she refuses to take *me* into consideration—or anyone else for the matter of that—because——"

She stops—she feels choking; she honestly believes that Tita likes Tom Hescott far more than she likes her husband. But that the girl is guilty, even in *thought* guilty, she does *not* believe; and now she speaks—and to this woman of all others—— And yet if she *does* speak, ruin will probably come out of it—to Tita. She hesitates; she is lost!

"Oh, go on!" says Lady Rylton, who can be a little vulgar at times—where the soul is coarse, the manner will be coarse too.

"There is a cousin!" says Marian slowly.

"A cousin? You grow interesting!" says Lady Rylton. There is a silence for a moment, and then: "Do you mean to tell me that this girl," with a scornful intonation, "has a—Really" with a shrug, "considering her birth, one may be excused for calling it—a *follower*?"

"Yes."

"And so *l'ingénue* has awakened at last!"

"If you mean Tita," icily, "I think she is in love with her cousin; and, beyond all doubt, her cousin is in love with her."

"Birds of a feather!" says Lady Rylton. It has been plain to Marian for the past five minutes that her aunt has been keeping back her temper with some difficulty. Now it flames forth. "The *insolence!*" cries she, between her teeth. "That little half-bred creature! Fancy—just *_fancy_*—her daring to be unfaithful to *my* son! To marry a Rylton, and then bring a low intrigue into his family!" She turns furiously on Marian. "Where is she?"

"Tita?"

"Yes. I must see her this moment—this *moment*; do you hear?" The tyrannical nature of her breaks out now in a furious outburst. She would have liked to get Tita in her grasp and crush her. She rises. "I wish to speak to her."

"I should advise you to do no such foolish thing," says Mrs. Bethune, rising too.

"*You* advise!—you! Who are you?" says Lady Rylton insolently. "When did I ask for your advice, or take it? Send that girl here—directly."

"Surely you forget that 'that girl' is at this moment your hostess!" says Marian Bethune, who has some sense of decency left. "This is her house; I could not deliver such a message to her."

"Then take another! Say——"

"Nor any other. She dislikes me, as I dislike her. If you wish to see her, send a message through her maid, or," a happy thought coming to her, "through Margaret; she cares for Tita as a cat might care for her kitten!"

"Poor Margaret," says Lady Rylton, with a sneer. "I fear she will always have to care for other cats' kittens!"

"Do you? I don't," says Marian, who, though she detests most people, has always a strange tenderness for Margaret.

"What do you mean?" asks Lady Rylton sharply.

"I think she will marry Colonel Neilson."

"Don't make yourself more absurd than you need be!" says her aunt contemptuously. "An old maid like that! What could Colonel Neilson see in her? I don't believe a word of that ridiculous story. Why, she is nearly as bad—*worse*, indeed," with a short laugh, "than a widow——like you!"

"I think she will marry him, for all that," says Mrs. Bethune calmly, with supreme self-control. She takes no notice of her insult.

"You can think as you like," says her aunt. "There, go away; I must arrange about seeing that girl."

CHAPTER X.

HOW "THAT GIRL" WAS "SEEN" BY THE DOWAGER LADY RYLTON; AND HOW TITA HELD HER SMALL HEAD VERY HIGH, AND FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT WITH THE ENEMY.

There is scarcely time for Lady Rylton to make arrangements for a private interview with her daughter-in-law, as Mrs. Bethune has scarcely left her room before that small person knocks at the door. And there is, perhaps, a slight touch of confusion on the older woman's face as Tita enters. She had not had time to prepare the little bitter barbs she had meant to fling against the girl's heart, and is now slightly taken aback.

However, Nature, the All-Mother, has been generous to Tessie in the way of venom, and after a moment or two she tells herself that she will be able to get through this interview with honour.

"My dear Tita. You! So glad! Pray come and sit down."

"I just came," says Tita smiling, but hesitating on the threshold, as if desirous of an excuse to run away again as quickly as possible, "to see if you were quite comfortable—quite happy."

"Ah, *happy!*" says Lady Rylton in a peculiar tone. "Do come in, Tita. It is a fad of mine—a silly one, no doubt—but I cannot bear to look at an open door. Besides, I wish to speak to you."

Tita closes the door and comes well into the room. She does not seat herself, however; she remains standing near the chimney-piece.

"About what?" asks she promptly.

"About many things." Perhaps the girl's bluntness has daunted her a little, because, as she says this, she moves uneasily, and finally changes her seat for a low lounge that brings the light on the back of her head. "I am sorry to say I have heard several unpleasant things about you of late."

Tita stares at her.

"I don't understand you," says she.

"Then it must be my unhappy task to have to explain myself," says Tessie, who has now recovered herself, and is beginning to revel in the situation. The merriest game of all, to *some* people, is that of hurting the feelings of others. "For one thing, I am grieved to hear that you have made my son far from happy in his married life."

A quick red dyes Tita's face. It lasts for a moment only. She controls herself admirably, and, going to a chair, pulls it a little forward in a perfectly self-possessed fashion, pausing a little over the exact position of it, after which she seats herself amongst the cushions.

"Has Maurice told you that?" asks she.

"Maurice? *No!*" haughtily. "In *our* set husbands do not complain of their wives."

"No?" says Tita. She looks amused. "Then who else could it be in 'our set' who has said nasty little things about me? Mrs. Bethune?"

"All this is beside the question," says the dowager, with a wave of her hand. "There is something else I must speak of—painful though it is to me!" She unfurls the everlasting fan, and wafts it delicately to and fro, as if to blow away from her the hideous aroma of the thing she is forced to say. "I hear you have established a—er—a far too friendly relationship with a—er—a cousin of your own."

If Tita had grown red before, she is very white now.

"I am sure you are not aware of it," says she, setting her small teeth, but speaking quite calmly, "but you are very impertinent."

"I—I?" says Lady Rylton. In all her long, tyrannical life she has met with so few people to show her defiance, that now this girl's contemptuous reply daunts her. "You forget yourself," says she, with ill-suppressed fury.

"No, indeed," says Tita, "it is because I remember myself that I spoke like that. And I think it will save time," says she quietly, "and perhaps a good deal of temper too—mine," smiling coldly, "is not good, you know—if you understand at once that I shall not allow you to say insolent things like that to me."

"*You allow me!*" Tessie gets up from her chair and stares at her opponent, who remains seated, looking back at her. "I see you have made up your mind to ruin my son," says she, changing her tone to one of tearful indignation. "You accepted him, you married him, but you have never made even an effort to love him."

Here Tessie sinks back in her chair and covers her eyes with her handkerchief. This is her way of telling people she is crying; it saves the rouge and the powder, and leaves the eye-lashes as black as before.

"It is not always easy to love someone who is in love with someone else," says Tita.

"Someone else! What do you mean?"

"There is one fault, at all events, that you cannot find with me," says Tita; "I have not got a bad memory. As if it were only yesterday, I remember how you enlightened me about Maurice's affection"—she would have said "love," but somehow she cannot—"for—for Mrs. Bethune."

"Pouf!" says the dowager. "*That!* I don't see how that can influence your conduct. You married my son, and you ought to do your duty by him. As for Marian, if you had been a good wife you should have taught him to forget all that long ago. It seems you have not." She darts this barbed arrow with much joy, and watches for the pain it ought to have caused, but watches in vain. "The fact of your remembering it all this time only shows," says Tessie vindictively, angry at the failure of her dart, "what a malicious spirit you have. You are not only malicious, but silly! People of the world *never* remember unpleasant things."

"Well, I am not of them; I remember," says Tita. She pauses. "People of the world seem to me to do strange things."

"On the contrary," with a sneer, "it is people who are not in society who do strange things."

"Meaning me?" flushing and frowning. Tita's temper is beginning to give way. "What have I done now?" asks she.

"That is what I have been trying to explain," says Lady Rylton, "but your temper is so frightful that I am afraid to go into anything. Temper, my dear Tita, should always be one's slave; it should never be given liberty except in one's room, with one's own maid or one's own husband."

"Or one's own mother-in-law!"

"Well, yes! Quite so!" says Tessie with a fine shrug. "If you *will* make me one apart, so be it. I hate scenes; but when one has a son—a precious, *only* child—one must make sacrifices."

"I beg you will make none for *me*."

"I have made one already, however. I have permitted my son to marry you."

"Lady Rylton——"

"Be silent!" says Tessie, in a low but terrible voice. "How *dare* you interrupt me, or speak to me at all, until I ask for a reply? *You*, whom I have brought from the very depths, to a decent position in society! You—whom I have raised!"

"Raised!"

"Yes—you! I tell you you owe me a debt you never can repay."

"I do indeed," says Tita, in a low voice; her small firm hands are clasped in front of her—they are tightly clenched.

"You married him for ambition," goes on Tessie, with cold hatred in her voice and eye, "and——"

"And he?" The girl has risen now, and is clinging with both hands to the arms of her chair. She is very pale.

"Pshaw!" says the dowager, laughing cruelly. "He married you for your money. What else do you think he would marry *you* for? Are you to learn that now?"

"No." Tita throws up her head. "*That* pleasure is denied you. He told me he was marrying me for my money, long before our marriage."

Lady Rylton laughs.

"What! He had the audacity?"

"The honesty!" Somehow this answer, coming straight from Tita's heart, goes to her soul, and in some queer, indescribable way soothes her—comforts her—gives her deep compensation for all the agony she has been enduring. Later on she wonders why the agony *was* so great! Why had she cared or suffered? Maurice and she? What are they to each other? A mere name—no more! And yet—and yet!

"At all events," goes on Tessie, "when you made up your mind to marry my son, you——"

"It was your son who married me," says Tita, with a touch of hauteur that sits very prettily on her. She feels suddenly stronger—more equal to the fight.

"Was it? I quite forget"—Tessie shrugs her shoulders—"these *little* points," says she. "Well, I give you that! Oh! he was honest!" says she. "But, after all, not quite honest enough."

"I think he was honest," says Tita.

Her heart is beginning to beat to suffocation. There is a horror in her mind—the horror of hearing again that he—he had loved Marian. But how to stop it?

"You seem to admire honesty," says Lady Rylton, with a sneering laugh. "It is a pity you do not emulate *his*! If Maurice is as true to you as you"—with a slight laugh—"imagine him, why, you should, in common generosity, be true to him. And this flirtation, with this Mr. Hescott——"

"Don't go on!" says Tita passionately; "I cannot bear it. Whoever has told you that I ever—— Oh!" She covers her eyes suddenly with her pretty hands. "Oh! it is a lie!" cries she.

"No one has told me a lie," says Lady Rylton implacably.

The sight of the girl's distress is very pleasant to her. She gloats over it.

"Then you have invented the whole thing," cries Tita wildly, who is so angry, so agitated, that she forgets the commonest decencies of life. We all do occasionally!

"To be rude is not to be forcible," says Tessie, who is now a fury, "and I believe all that I have heard about you!" She makes a quick movement towards Tita, her colour showing even through the washes that try to make her skin look young. "How *dare* you insult me?" cries she furiously. Tessie in a rage is almost the vulgarest thing that anyone could see. "I wish my son had never seen you—or your money. I wish now he had married the woman he loved, instead of the woman whom——"

"He hated," puts in Tita very softly.

She smiles in a sort of last defiance, but every hope she has seems lying dead. In a second, as it were, she seems to *care* for nothing. What *is* there to care for? It is so odd. But it is true! How blank the whole thing is!

"Yes. *Hated!*" says Tessie in a cold fury. "I tell you he wanted to marry Marian, and her only. He would have given his soul for her, but she would not marry him! And then, when hope was at an end, he—destroyed self—he married *you!*"

"You are very plain! You leave nothing to be said." Tita has compelled herself to this answer, but her voice is faint. Her poor little face, beautiful even in its distress, is as white as death. "I am sorry——"

"For Maurice? So you *ought* to be," says Lady Rylton, unmoved even by that pathetic face before her.

Tita turns upon her. All at once the old spirit springs to life within the poor child's breast.

"No, *for myself!*" cries she, with a bitterness hardly to be described.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW TITA GOES FOR A WALK WITH TWO SAD COMPANIONS—ANGER AND DESPAIR; AND HOW SHE MEETS SIR MAURICE; AND HOW SHE INTRODUCES HIM TO ANGER.

Escaping from her mother-in-law's room, Tita goes hurriedly, carefully downstairs. There is no one in the smaller hall; she runs through it, and into one of the conservatories that has a door leading to the gardens outside. Its is a small conservatory, little frequented; and when one gets to the end of the two steps, one finds one's self at the part of the garden that leads directly into the woods beyond.

Tita, flinging open the little rustic gate that opens a way to these woods, hastens through it as though all the furies are at her back, and never ceases running until she finds herself a good half-mile from home.

And now she throws herself upon a sort mossy bank, and, clasping her hands in front of her, gives herself up to thought. Most women when in grief make direct for their bedrooms; Tita, a mere child of Nature, has turned to her mother in her great extremity. Her heart seems on fire, her eyes dry and burning. Her quick, angry run has left her tired and panting, and like one at bay.

She lays her flushed cheek against the cold, sweet mosses.

How good, how *eternally* good is the exquisite heart of the earth! A very balm from it seems now to arise and take this young creature into its embrace. The coolness, the softness of it! Who shall describe it? The girl lying on the ground, not understanding, feels the great light hand of the All-Mother on her head, and suddenly the first great pang dies. Nature, the supreme Hypnotizer, has come to her rescue, not dulling or destroying the senses, but soothing them, and showing a way out of the darkness, flinging a lamp into the dim, winding ways of her misery.

The cool mosses have brought her to herself again. She sits up, and, taking her knees into her embrace, looks out upon the world. To her it seems a cruel world, full of nothing but injustice. She has a long talk with herself, poor child!—a most bitter conversation. And the end of it is this: If only she could *see* Maurice and tell him—*tell* him what she thinks of him; and if only—— But it seems so impossible.

And here is where Mother Nature's doings come in. She has driven Maurice from his house almost as Tita left it, and has sent him here; for does he not know that Tita loves this solitary spot, and—

He has sprung upon the wall, and it is quite suddenly he sees her. Her attitude makes his heart stand still. Has it come to this? Has he brought her to this? What a child she was when he married her!—light-hearted, free—

Free! Was she free? This word spoils all his sympathy. Was she really free? Did she not love her cousin even then, when she consented to marry *him*? He springs lightly to the ground; his gun is on his shoulder, but he lays that against a tree, and goes lightly towards her.

How still she is! How tightly her small hands are clasped! How *very* *small* they are! Is that the first ring he had given her, shining on her third finger? She had not flung *that* back in his face, at all events! He hardly understands the wild, quick thrill of joy that this knowledge affords him. And how pale she is!

"In all her face was not one drop of blood."

She is staring before her, as if into the future—as if *demanding* happiness from it for her youth. He goes quickly to her.

"I was just getting over that fence there," says he, in a rather stammering sort of way, the new strange pallor on that small, erstwhile happy face having disarranged his nerves a little, "when I saw you. I am glad I saw you, as I wanted to say that perhaps I spoke to you too—roughly last night."

Tita remains silent. Something in her whole air seems to him changed. Her eyes—her mouth—what has happened to them? Such a change! And all since last night! Had he indeed been so rough with her as to cause all this?

"How bitter and winterly waxed last night
The air that was mild!
How nipped with frost were the flowers last night
That at dawning smiled!
How the bird lost the tune of the song last night
That the spring beguiled!"

Did it all happen last night? He breaks through his wonder to hear her.

"I don't know how you dared speak to me at all," says she at last slowly, deliberately.

Where is the childish anger now that used to irritate—and amuse him? It is all gone. This is hardly Tita, this girl, cold, repellent; it is an absurd thought, but it seems to him that she has grown!

"I spoke—because— I think I explained," says he, somewhat incoherently, upset not so much by her words (which are strange, too) as by the strange look that accompanies them.

"Ah, explained!" says she. Her lips curl slightly, and her eyes (always fastened upon his) seem to grow darker. "If you are coming to explanations—" says she softly, but with some intensity. "*Have* you explained things? And when? Was it *before* our marriage? It *should* *have* been, I think!"

Rylton changes colour. It is such a sudden change that the girl goes over to him and lays her hand upon his chest.

"Did you think—all this time—that I did not know?" says she, raising her eyes to his—such solemn young eyes. "I have known it a long, long time. *Always*, I think! Your mother told me when we went to the Hall after our—trip abroad."

"She told you what?"

It is a last effort to spare— To spare whom? Marian or himself—or— All at once he knows it is Tita whom he would spare.

"Ah, that is useless," says Tita, with a slight gesture. "She told me a great deal then; she has told me more to-day."

"To-day?"

"A few last items," says the girl, her eyes burning into his as she stands before him, her hand upon his breast. "Shall I tell them to you? You married me for my money! You ruined your life"—she seems to be looking back and repeating things that had been said to her—"by doing *that*. Your mother" slowly, "seemed sorry that your life was ruined!"

"Tita!"

"No, listen; there is a little more. You only consented to make me your wife when you found Mrs. Bethune would not have you."

"You shall hear me," says he.

His face is as white as death now, but she silences him. She lifts her small, cold hand from his breast, and lays it on his lips that are nearly as cold.

"You proposed to her four times! All your love was hers! And it was only when hope was *dead*—when life seemed worthless—that you—married me."

"She told you that—all that?" asks Rylton; he has caught her hand.

"All that—and more." Tita is smiling now, but very pitifully. "But that was enough. Why take it to heart? It is nothing, really. It does not concern us. Of course, I always knew. You *told* me—that you did not love me."

"I shall not forgive her," says Rylton fiercely.

There is anguish as well as rage in his tone. He is holding her hand tightly clenched between both his own.

"I don't care whether you do or not," says Tita suddenly, almost violently. "You can forgive her or not, as you choose. The whole thing," dragging her hand forcibly from his, "is a matter of no consequence whatever to *me!*"

"You mean that you don't care?" says Rylton, in a suffocating voice.

"Care!" contemptuously. "No! Why should I care, or wonder, or waste one thought upon your love affairs?"

This insolent answer rouses Rylton from his remorse.

"Why, indeed!" says he, stung by her scorn. "You have *your own to think of!*"

And now a terrible thing happens—swift as lightning she lifts her hand, and gives him a little stinging blow across his face.

A second afterwards she has her hands upon her breast, and is crying affrightedly.

"I'm sorry—*I'm sorry—I'm sorry!*"

Yet through all the fright he can hear there is not an atom of real sorrow in her voice.

"Let that alone," says he, smiling grimly. "I dare say I deserved it. I take it meekly, as you see. But now—how is it to be between us?"

"You know. You *ought* to know. We agreed before our marriage that you were to go your way, and I—mine!"

"Very well," says Rylton slowly. "Let it be so. Remember always, however," looking fixedly at her, "that it was *you* who insisted on it."

"I shall remember," says Tita.

She turns and walks quickly on the path that leads to the house. Rylton turns to accompany her. But she, stopping short, looks up at him with a frowning brow.

"We have been talking about ways," says she. "This," with a little significant gesture to the right, "is my way."

He lifts his brows and laughs, a very sad and dismal laugh, however.

"And therefore not mine," says he. "You are right so far. I meant to go on to Upsall Farm, but I should like to see you safely back to the avenue, at all events—if you will allow me?"

"*No!*" Tita has turned upon him like a little fury. All her rage and grief and misery has at last overpowered her. "I shall not allow you! I shall go nowhere with you! Our ways, as you say, are separate."

"As I say——"

"It doesn't matter," says she vehemently; "words are nothing. There is only meaning left, and what I mean is that I want never to go anywhere with you again."

"As you will, of course," says he, drawing back. Evidently it is to be war to the knife.

He could have laughed at himself as he leans back against a huge oak-tree and lights a cigar. Truly he is no Don Juan! The woman he loved did not love him to any measurable extent; the woman he married cares for him even less!

A very rage of anger against Tita is filling his breast, but now, standing here in the cold soft shades of the silent wood, his anger gives place to thought. By what right is he angry with her? By what right does he upbraid her? She knows all—everything. His *mother* had seen to that. Yes, his wife knows——

And yet, after all, what is there to condemn him for? What man under heaven has been so scrupulous, so careful as he? There had been that one night at the Warbeck's dance—but beyond that, never by word or look had he been unfaithful!

He is beginning almost to pride himself upon his good behaviour, when all at once it comes to him that it has been *easy* to be faithful, that there has been no trouble at all about being scrupulous.

It is like a dagger in his heart. Is it all at the end then? Must it be regarded as a thing that was told—that old, sweet story! Dead, withered, with the life, the meaning, gone from it. And if so, what remains?

Nothing but the face of a small, angry little girl defying him—defying him always.

Pouf! He thrusts it from him. He lights another cigar. Again the old anger breaks out. Tita's words come back to him. Plainly she would be as glad to get rid of him as he—— She had spoken of her own way. Why not let her go that way? It leads to her cousin. All the finger-posts point in that direction. Well—— If so—— There might be a divorce, and a divorce would mean marriage with Marian, and——

He stands staring stupidly at the ground before him. What is the matter with him? Only three months, three little months ago, and such a thought would have raised ecstasy within his heart, and now——

How flat it all seems, how unprofitable! Nothing seems alive within him save a desire for vengeance on this child who has dared to drag his name into the dust.

This child!

Again her face rises before him. Pale, determined, scorning him! He had read hatred in her glance, and behind that hatred—bred of it, perhaps—love for her cousin.

He flings his cigar into a bush near him, and goes back to the house, taking the path his wife had chosen.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW TITA, RUNNING FROM THE ENEMY, SUDDENLY FINDS HERSELF FACE TO FACE WITH ANOTHER FOE; AND HOW SHE FIGHTS A SECOND BATTLE, AND COMES OFF VICTORIOUS!

Tita, once out of the sight of Maurice, had run home very quickly. She knew that she was crying, and despised herself for so doing, but could not check her tears. She was not sure what they meant, grief or rage. Perhaps a little of both. All her guests were in the garden, so she would not return to the house that way, though it was much the nearest; but turning into a side path she made for a point in the shrubberies, from which one could get to the armoury door without being seen by anyone.

She is wrong in her calculations, however, for just as she steps into the shrubbery walk, she finds herself face to face with Tom Hescott.

"*Tita!* You have been crying!" says he suddenly, after a devouring glance at her small face, that indeed shows all the signs of woe.

"No, no!" cries Tita breathlessly.

She puts up her hands in protestation. She has grown crimson with shame and vexation.

"You have," says Hescott, almost savagely. The knowledge that he is leaving to-morrow (they are all leaving except the elder Lady Rylton) has rendered him desperate, and made more difficult of concealment the mad passion he entertains for her. "What has happened?" he asks, going closer to her and letting his cigar drop to the ground. "Are you unhappy? You," breathing quickly, "have been unhappy for a long time!"

"And even so, am I the only person in the world who is unhappy? Are you never unhappy?" demands Tita defiantly.

"God knows I am, *always!*" says Hescott. "But you! That *you* should be unhappy!"

"Never mind me," says Tita petulantly. "And I must say," with a little flaming glance at him, "that it would have been in much better taste if you—if you had pretended to see that I was *not* crying."

Hescott does not hear, or takes no notice of this little bombshell.

"Has your husband been unkind to you?" asks he sharply, most unpardonably.

Tita looks at him for a second as if he had struck her, and then waves him aside imperiously.

"Maurice is never unkind to me," says she, "and even if he were, I should not allow you or anyone to question me in the matter. What are you thinking of?"

"Of you," slowly.

"You waste your time," says Tita.

"It is not wasted. It is spent on you," says Hescott, with compressed but strong passion. "And now a last word, Tita. If ever you want to—to——" He hesitates. "To leave him," he had almost said, but her proud eyes and her pale lips made him hesitate—*such* pride! It raises his love for her to fever-heat. "If ever you should want anyone to help you, I——"

She interrupts him. She makes a haughty little gesture with hand. It would be impossible to describe the wild grace and beauty of it—or the dignity.

"If ever I should, I shall have Maurice!" says she coldly.

Hescott looks at her. Of course he has been told that old story about Mrs. Bethune, and has seen for himself many things.

"You are an angel!" says he at last, very sadly; yet he would not have wished her less than that.

"Don't be absurd!" says Tita most ungratefully.

She marches past him with her angry little head still upheld, but presently a word from him brings her to a standstill.

"Don't be angry with me, Tita," he is saying in a low tone. "I'm going away to-morrow."

"Ah, so you are!" says Tita. Her sweet nature comes back to her. Dear old Tom! And she has been saying such horrid things to him. "Never mind me, Tom!" says she, holding out her hand to him. "I'm dreadfully cross sometimes, but I don't ever mean it, really. And," smiling gently at him, "you *know* that I love you!"

Hescott takes her hand. His heart seems very full—too full for words. Those words, "I love you!" He stoops and presses a kiss upon the little warm fingers now resting within his own. And without another word he leaves her.

He is hardly gone, when Rylton lays his hand upon her arm.

"Well," says he, his voice vibrating with anger. He had followed her, as has been said, with no idea of watching her, but with a curious longing to get near to her again. *Why*, he could hardly have explained even to himself. The only thing he did know in that walk homeward was that he was most horribly, most unreasonably unhappy!

He had followed her and he had found her crying, or at least with the signs of tears upon her eyes, and had seen her cousin kissing her hand. A slight madness came over him then. Crying for her cousin, no doubt, because he must leave her to-morrow!

"Well!" His tone is abrupt, almost brutal. Yet even in this hour where all things point to her discomfiture he cannot get the victory over her.

"Well?" demands she in return, shaking her arm loose from his hold.

"You have been crying for him, no doubt—for your——" He pauses.

"My what?" asks Tita. She is looking at him with fearless, wondering eyes.

"Your cousin," says Rylton, altering the phrase that would have made it in his anger, "your lover."

"I have not been crying because of Tom," says Tita coldly, "though I am very sorry he is going. He loves me, I *think*."

"Do you?" says Rylton. A sarcastic smile crosses his lips "And you? Do you love him? No doubt cousins are charming possessions. And so I find you crying because your dear possession is going, and because, no doubt, you were confiding to him what a desperate monster a husband can be."

There is hardly anything in his life afterwards that Rylton is so ashamed of as this; even now in the heat of the terrible anger that leads him so to forget himself, he cowers before the girl's eyes.

"Is that what people do in *your* set?" says she coldly—icily. "In the charmed circle within which your mother tells me I am not fit to enter? If so, I am glad I do not belong to it. Set your mind at ease, Maurice. I have not told Tom anything about you. I have not even told him what a——" She pauses. A flash from her eyes enters his. "I have told him nothing—nothing," says she, running past him into the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW A LITTLE SPARRING IS DONE AMONGST THE GUESTS AT OAKDEAN; AND HOW TOM HESCOTT TELLS A STORY.

Meantime all the others are sitting out in the garden, gossiping to their hearts' content. They had tried tennis, but the courts are rather soft now; and though an Indian summer has fallen upon us, still it has not sufficed to dry up all the moisture caused by the late rains.

The little thatched hut at the end of the gardens, where the sun is now blazing, has drawn them all into a net, as it were. It is an off day, when there is no shooting, and the women are therefore jubilant, and distinctly in the ascendant. The elder Lady Rylton is not present, which adds to the hilarity of the hour, as in spite of her wonderful juvenility she is by no means a favourite. Miss Gower, however, is—which balances the situation.

"I don't believe I ever felt so sorry for leaving any place," says Mrs. Chichester (who is always talking) with a soft but prolonged sigh—the sigh that is meant to be heard. She casts a languishing glance at Marryatt as she says this. He is *not* invited to the next country house to which she is bound. He returns her glance fourfold, upon which she instantly dives behind Mrs. Bethune's back, on the pretence of speaking to Margaret, but in reality to hide her face.

"Yes; I feel sorry too," says Colonel Neilson. "Where are you going?"

"To the Hastings'," says Mrs. Chichester, who has now emerged from behind Marian's back, with the same sad face as before. "*You* know her. Matilda Bruce!"

"Bless me! Has *she* got married?" says Colonel Neilson, who is really the kindest-hearted man alive.

"Yes; quite a year ago."

Mrs. Bethune laughs her usual slow, cruel little laugh, that is always in some strange way so full of fascination. She, too, had known Matilda Bruce. "I am afraid poor Mr. Hastings must have had a great many refusals," says she. She looks at Mrs. Chichester. "So you are going there?"

"Yes, for my sins. Fred Hastings is a very old friend of mine."

"What a great many old friends you have," says Mrs. Bethune softly.

"Well, it is better to have old friends than no friends"—making the retort courteous, with a beaming smile.

"I've been staying at the Hastings', too," says Minnie Hescott, glad to show that she is within the sacred circle, even though it be on its outermost edge. "But——" She stops.

"I know. You needn't go on," says Mrs. Chichester. "I've heard all about it. A terrible *ménage*, and no fires anywhere. Amy Stuart told me—she was staying with them last Christmas—that she often wished she was the roast joint in the oven, she felt so *withered up* with cold."

"Well, marriage improves people," says Colonel Neilson, laughing. "Let us hope it will enlarge Mrs. Hastings' mind as to the matter of fires."

"It will!" says Mrs. Chichester.

"But why? If——" says Margaret, leaning forward.

"Because marriage improves women, and"—Mrs. Chichester pauses, and lets her queer green eyes rest on Marryatt's—"and does the other thing for men."

Marryatt is looking back at her as if transfixed. He is thinking of her words rather than of her. Has marriage disimproved *her* husband? Has he been a brute to her? He knows so little—she has told him so little! At this moment it occurs to him that she has told him *nothing*.

"What are you staring at?" asks she presently. "Is anything the matter with me? Have I straws in my hair?"

His answer is interrupted by Mr. Gower.

"Take it down," says he. "How can anyone tell nowadays what a woman has in her hair unless one sees?"

"Well, it's not straws, any way," says Mrs. Chichester, with a shrug of her lean shoulders.

"It might be worse!" says Mr. Gower, who has always declared that Mrs. Chichester has dyed her hair. His tone, which is always sepulchral, attracts immediate attention, as all things sepulchral do. "And as for Matilda Bruce, I refuse to see why you should sit upon her with such determined cruelty. I know her, and I think her a most excellent wife, and house-wife, and—*mother!*"

"A mother!" says Margaret, who had known Mrs. Bruce slightly, but had not been in sympathy with her.

"Why, yes! She's got a baby," says Mrs. Chichester. "Didn't you hear? Nobody *does* hear much about them. For my part, I pity her about that baby! It's so awkward to have children!"

"Awkward?"

"Yes. Nasty people go about asking their ages, especially the age of the eldest little horror, and then they can guess to a nicety how long one must have lived. It's a mean way of finding out one's age. I'm thankful *I* have no children."

Mrs. Chichester leans back in her chair and laughs. Perhaps—*perhaps*—there is a regret in her laugh.

"I think it is the *children* who ought to be thankful," says old Miss Gower, covering her with a condemnatory glance.

Mrs. Chichester turns her eye on her.

"Do you know, Miss Gower, you have for once hit a happy truth," says she.

She smiles blandly on the terrible old maid. But Tita, who has just come down from her room, and has entered the hut, is struck by the queer expression in her eyes.

"You have come at last, Tita," says Margaret, going to her.

"I have had such a headache," says Tita, pressing her hands to her brow. "It has worried me all day. But I came down now, hoping the air and"—sweetly looking round her—"all of you would cure it."

"I think you ought to be lying down," says Margaret, seeing the pallor of the young face before her, and pitying the determination, so plainly to be seen, to keep up.

"Maurice"—to Rylton, who has come on the scene a moment later than his wife, so immediately after her, indeed, that one might be forgiven for imagining he had come in her train, only for one thing, he had come from an opposite direction—"Maurice, I think Tita should be induced to lie down for a bit. She looks tired."

"Nonsense," says Tita.

Her tone is almost repellent, although it is to Margaret she speaks. But in reality the tone is meant for Maurice.

"I've got a headache, certainly. But I firmly believe that it has grown out of the knowledge that you are all going to desert me to-morrow."

This little speech, most innocently meant, she points by smiling at her cousin, Tom Hescott. She had been unkind to him down there in the shrubbery awhile ago, she tells herself, and now she is telling him in silent, sweet little ways that she meant nothing nasty, nothing cold or uncourteous.

Her husband, watching her, sees the glance, and grinds under it. He misunderstands it. As for Tom! Poor Tom! He, too, sees the pretty glance, and he, too, misunderstands it.

All at once a quick but most erroneous thought springs to life within his heart. Her glance now! Her tears awhile ago! Were they for him? Is she sorry because he is leaving her? Is her life here unbearable?

Mrs. Bethune has risen and come up to Tita.

"You speak as if we were going to leave you to immediate destruction?" says she. "Are you afraid of being left alone with—Maurice?"

Mrs. Chichester, who has a great deal of good in her, mixed up with a terrible amount of frivolity, comes forward so quietly that Tita's sudden whiteness is hardly seen, except by one.

"Fancy being afraid of Sir Maurice," says she. "Sir Maurice," casting a laughing glance at him, "I shouldn't be afraid of you."

Sir Maurice laughs back, and everyone laughs with him, and Mrs. Bethune's barb is blunted.

"I am not afraid of anything," says Tita lightly. "But I confess I feel sorry at the thought of losing you all, even for a time——"

This prettily, and with a glance round her as good as an invitation for next year.

"I know you, Minnie" (to her cousin), "are going to delightful people—and you," turning suddenly to Mrs. Bethune, "I hope you are going to friends?"

"Friends! I have no friends," says Marian Bethune sombrely. "I have learned to forbid myself such luxuries. I can't afford them. I find them too expensive!"

"Expensive?"

"Yes. A loss to me of peace of mind that can never be made up." She smiles at Tita, a cold, unpleasant smile. "Do you know what my definition of a friend is? Someone who takes delight in telling you all the detestable things your *other* friends have said of you."

"I don't think much of *your* friends, any way," says Mrs. Chichester, who as a rule is always *en évidence*. "Do you, Sir Maurice?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you agree with Mrs. Bethune?"

"I always agree with everybody," says Rylton, smiling.

Tita moves abruptly away.

"What a hot day it is," says she petulantly, "and nothing to do. Tom," beckoning Hescott to her, "tell us a story. Do. You used to tell beautiful ones—in—the old days."

"Do you still long for them?" asks Mrs. Bethune, always with her supercilious smile, and in a tone that is almost a whisper, yet quite loud enough for Rylton, who is standing near, to hear.

"Do *you*?" demands Tita, turning upon her with eyes ablaze with miserable anger.

"I?" haughtily. "What do you mean?"

Tita lifts her eyes to Rylton—*such* eyes.

"*He* will tell you," says she, and with a little scornful lifting of her chin she turns away.

"Now for your story, Tom," cries she gaily, merrily.

"You take me very short," says Hescott, who seems, in his present mood, which is of the darkest, to be the last man in Europe to tell an amusing tale. "But one occurs to me, and, of course," looking round him, "you all know it. Everyone nowadays knows every story that has and has not been told since the world began. Well, any way, I heard of a man the other day who—it is a most extraordinary thing—but he hated his wife!"

"For goodness' sake tell us something new," says Mrs. Chichester, with open disgust.

"Isn't that new? Well, this man was at a prayer-meeting of some sort. There is a sort of bad man that hankers after prayer-meetings, and, of course, this was a bad man because he hated his wife. It was at the East End, and Job was the subject. Job is good for an East-End meeting, because patience is the sort of thing you must preach there nowadays if you wish to keep your houses from being set on fire; and he heard of all the troubles of Job, and how he was cursed—and how his children and cattle and goods had been taken from him—and *only his wife left!* That struck him—*about the wife!* 'Hang it! That was a big curse!' said he. 'Fancy leaving the *wife!*' And the odd part of it was," says Hescott, lifting his eyes and looking deliberately at Rylton, "that his wife was an angel, whereas he—well, *she* was the Job of *his* life. She had to endure all things at his hands."

Rylton looks back at him, and feels his brow grow black with rage. He would have liked to take him and choke the life out of him.

"A delightful story," says he, with a sneer. "So fresh, so *original!*"

"Very dull, I think," says Mrs. Chichester, who *can't* hold her tongue. "An everyday sort of thing. Lady Rylton, what do you think?"

But when they look round for her they find Tita has disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW TITA FLINGS HERSELF UPON MARGARET'S BREAST; AND HOW MARGARET COMFORTS HER; AND HOW TITA PROMISES TO BE GOOD; AND HOW SHE HAS A MEETING "BY LAMPLIGHT ALONE."

It is now eleven o'clock. Margaret, who is in her own room, and has sent her maid to bed, is sitting over her fire dreaming of many things, when her door is suddenly opened and as suddenly closed, and, just as suddenly as all the rest of it, a little fragile thing runs towards her, and flings herself in a perfectly tragic fashion upon her breast, lying there prone—lost, apparently, in an unappeasable outburst of grief.

"Tita, my child, my darling! What has happened?" exclaims Margaret, pressing the girl to her. "*Do* look up, my dear, and tell me. There is nothing new, surely, Tita."

"Oh, I'm tired—I'm tired of it all!" cries Tita wildly. "I want to be done with it. Oh, Margaret, I've said nothing, nothing! *Have* I, now?" appealing to her with great drenched eyes. "But I can go on no longer. He hates me."

"Oh, hush, hush, Tita!"

"He does! He was unkind to me all to-day. He is always unkind to me. He *hates* me, and he—loves her."

"I don't think so. I don't, really. Sit down, darling," says Margaret, in great agitation.

"I know he does. Did you see that he would hardly speak to me this evening, and——"

"I thought it was you who would not speak to him."

"Oh no, no! I was longing to speak to him. I can't bear being bad friends with *anyone*; but, of course, I could not go up to him, and tell him so; and he—what did *he* do?—he spent the whole evening with Mrs. Bethune in the conservatory."

"Tita, I assure you he was not alone with her then. Mrs. Chichester——"

"I don't care about his being alone with her," says Tita, whose mind is as fresh as her face. "He was *with* her all the evening; you know he was. Oh, how I hate that woman!"

"Tita, listen——"

"Yes; I hate her. And——" She stops and lays her hands on Margaret's arm and looks piteously at her. "Do you know," says she, "I used *not* to hate people. I thought once I hated my uncle, but I didn't know. It was nothing like this. It is dreadful to feel like this."

There is poignant anguish in the young voice. It goes to Margaret's heart.

"Tita, be sensible," says she sharply. "Do you think all the misery of the world is yours?"

"No, no," faintly. "Only *my* portion is so heavy."

She bursts into tears.

"Good heavens!" says Margaret distractedly, caressing her and soothing her. "What a world it is! Why, *why* cannot you and Maurice see how delightful you both are? It is an enigma. No one can solve it. Tita darling, take heart. Why—why, if Marian were so bad as you think her—which I pray God she isn't—still, think how far you can surpass her in youth, in charm, in beauty."

"Beauty!"

The girl looks up at Margaret as if too astonished to say more.

"*Certainly* in beauty," firmly. "Marian in her best days was never as lovely as you are. Never!"

"Ah! Now I know you love me," says Tita very sadly. "You alone think that." She pauses, and the pause is eloquent. "Maurice doesn't," says she.

"Maurice is a fool" is on Margaret's lips, but she resists the desire to say it to Maurice's wife, and, in the meantime, Tita has recovered herself somewhat, and is now giving full sway once more to her temper.

"After all, I don't care!" exclaims she. "Why should I? Maurice is as little to me as I am to him. What I *do* care about is being scolded by him all day long, when I have quite as good a right to scold him. Oh, better! He has behaved badly, Margaret, hasn't he? He should never have married me without *telling* me of—of her."

"I think he should have told you," says Margaret, with decision. "But I think, too, Tita, that he has been perfectly true to you since his marriage."

"True?"

"I mean—I think—he has not shown any special attention to Marian."

"He showed it to-night, any way," rebelliously.

"He did not indeed. She asked him to show her the chrysanthemums, and what could he do but go with her to the conservatory? And I particularly noticed that as he passed Mrs. Chichester he asked her to come and see them too."

"He didn't ask me, at all events," says Tita.

"Perhaps he was afraid; and, indeed, Tita"—very gently—"you are not so altogether blameless yourself. You talked and played cards the whole night with Mr. Hescott."

"Oh, poor old Tom! That was only because I had been unkind to him in the morning, and because"—ingenuously—"I wanted to pay out Maurice."

Margaret sighs.

"It is all very sad," says she.

"It is," says Tita, tears welling up into her eyes again—a sign of grace that Margaret welcomes.

"Well, go to bed now, darling; and, Tita, if Maurice says anything to you—anything——"

"Cross—I know!" puts in Tita.

"Promise me you will not answer him in anger, do promise me! It makes me so unhappy," says Margaret persuasively, kissing the girl, and pressing her in her arms.

"Oh! *Does* it? I'm sorry," says Tita, seeing the real distress on Margaret's sweet face. "There! He may say what he likes to me, I shan't answer him back. Not a word! A syllable! I'll be as good as gold!"

She kisses Margaret fondly, and leaves the room.

Outside, in the long corridor, the lamps are beginning to burn dimly. It is already twelve o'clock. Twelve strokes from the hall beneath fall upon Tita's ear as she goes hurriedly towards her own room. It is the midnight hour, the mystic hour, when ghosts do take their nightly rounds!

This is not a ghost, however, this tall young man, who, coming up by the central staircase, meets her now face to face.

"Tita! Is it you?"

"Yes, yes," says Tita, trying to hurry past him.

If Tom has come up from the smoking-room, of course the others will be coming too, and, on the whole, she is not as well got up as usual. It is with a sort of contempt she treats the charming gown in which she is now clothed. And yet she has hardly ever looked lovelier than now, with her eyes a little widened by her late grief, and her hair so sweetly disturbed, and her little slender form showing through the open folds of the long white gown that covers her.

"Don't go. Don't!" says Tom Hescott; his tone is so full of poignant anguish that she stops short. "Stay a moment." In his despair he has caught a fold of her gown. To do him fair justice, he honestly believes that she hates her husband, and that she is thoroughly unhappy with him. Unhappy with great cause. "I am going—you know that, and—I have a last word to say. I tried to say it this afternoon—out there—you know—in the shrubberies, and when you wouldn't listen—I—I respected that. I respected you. But—a time may come when you"—hurriedly—"may not always choose to live this wretched life. There will be a way out of it, Tita—a way not made by *you!*"

Tita suddenly feels very cold, chilled to her heart's core. She had listened so far as if stunned; but now she wakes, and the face of Marian Bethune seems to look with a cold sneer into hers.

"And after that," goes on Hescott, "if—if—" He breaks down. "Well, if *that* comes, you know I—*love* you, Tita."

He tries to take her hand.

"Don't touch me!" says Tita vehemently. She pushes his hand from her; such a disdainful little push. "Oh, I thought you really *did* love me," says she, "but not like *this!*" Suddenly a sort of rage and of anger springs to life within her. She turns a face, singularly childish, yet with the sad first break of womanhood upon it, to his. "How *dare* you love me like this?" says she.

"Tita, listen to me——"

"No. Not I! You must be a *fool* to talk to me like this. Of what use is it? What good? If you loved me for ever, what good could come of it? I don't love you! Ah!"—she catches her breath and looks straight at him with an undying sense of indignation—"Maurice was right about you, and I was wrong. He saw through you, I didn't. I"—with a little inward glance into her own feelings—"I shan't forgive you for *that*, either!"

"You mean——"

"It really doesn't matter," says Tita, cruel for the first time in all her sweet young life. The light is so dim that she cannot see his face distinctly. Perhaps if she had, she would have been kinder. "I mean nothing. Only go; go at once! Do you *hear?*"

Her childish voice grows imperious.

"I am going," says Hescott dully—"in the morning."

"Oh! I'm glad"—smiting her hands together—"by the *early* train?"

"The earliest!"

Hescott's soul seems dying within him. All at once the truth is clear to him, or, at least, half of it. She may not love her husband, but, beyond all question, love for him—Hescott—has never entered into her mind.

"And a good thing too!" says Tita wrathfully. "I hope I shall never see you here again. I could never bear to look at you after this!" She is standing trembling with agitation before him, like one full-filled with wrath. "To-day—I shall not forget *that*. To-day—and that story"—she stops as if choking—"what did you *mean* by telling that story?" demands she, almost violently. "Everyone there knew what you meant. It dragged me down to the ground. I hated you for it! You invented it. You *know* you did, just to humiliate *him*! You think Maurice hates me, but he doesn't. It is a lie!" She pauses, her lovely eyes aflame. "It is a lie!" she repeats passionately.

"If so——" begins Hescott, but in so low a tone, and so dead, that she scarcely heeds it.

"And to call me an angel before them all. Ah! I could read through you. So could everyone. It was an insult! I *won't* be called an angel. I am just what Maurice is, and no more. I wonder Maurice didn't *kill* you—and he would, only you were his guest. So would I—only——"

She breaks off. The tears are running down her cheeks. She makes a little swift turn of her body towards him.

"Oh, Tom! and I did so believe in *you!*"

There is a short silence fraught with misery for one soul, at all events.

"Believe in me still," says Tom Hescott, in a queer, low tone. "Believe in me now—and for ever—to"—with passionate fondness—"the last moment of your life." He draws his breath sharply. "And now good-bye."

He struggles with himself, and, failing in the struggle, catches her suddenly to his breast, and there holds her to his heart for half a minute, perhaps.

Then he releases her. It is all over. He had not even tried to kiss her. He goes swiftly past her into the gloom beyond the dying lamp, and is lost.

Tita stands as if stricken dumb. For a second only. *Then* she is conscious of a hand being laid on her arm, of her being forcibly led forward to her own room, of the door being closed behind her.

She turns and looks up at Rylton. His eyes are blazing. He is dangerously white across cheeks and nose.

"There shall be an end of this!" says he.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW JEALOUSY RUNS RIOT IN OAKDEAN; AND HOW MARGARET TRIES TO THROW OIL UPON THE WATERS; AND HOW A GREAT CRASH COMES, WITH MANY WORDS AND ONE SURPRISE.

Tita has wrenched herself from his grasp.

"Of *what?*" demands she.

"Do you think you can hoodwink me any longer? There shall be an end of it—do you hear?" Rylton's face, as she now sees it in the light of the lamps in her room, almost frightens her. "I've had enough of it!"

"I don't understand you!" says Tita, standing well away from him, her face as white as ashes.

As for *his* face——

"Don't you?" violently. "Then I shall explain. I've had enough of what ruins men's lives and honours—of what leads to——"

"To?" says the girl, shrinking, yet leaning forward.

"To the devil—to the Divorce Court!" says Rylton, with increasing violence. "Do you think I did not see you and him just now—you—*in his arms!* Look here!"

He seizes her arm. There is a quick, sudden movement, and she is once again free. Such a little, fragile creature! She seems to have grown a woman during this encounter, and to be now tall to him, and strong and imperious.

"Don't!" says she, in a curious tone, so low as to be almost unheard, yet clear to him. "Don't come near me. *Don't!* What do you accuse me of?"

"You know right well. Do you think the whole world—*our* world, at all events—has not seen how it has been with you and—"

He cannot go on. He pauses, looking at her. He had meant to spare her feelings; but, to his surprise, she meets his gaze fully, and says, "Well?" in a questioning way.

At this his rage bursts forth.

"Are you *quite* shameless that you talk to me like this?" cries he. "Are you mad?" As he speaks, his fingers tighten on a piece of paper—evidently a letter—that he is holding in his right hand. "You *must* know that I saw you with him to-night—you—in his arms—*you*—"

Tita turns upon him.

"It is you who are mad," says she. She goes quite close to him. "He was going. He was bidding me good-bye." She pauses; her breath comes heavily, but she goes on: "He was bidding me good-bye, and—he told me he loved me—"

Rylton flings her from him.

"Do you pretend that was the first time?"

"The first—the *first?*" cries Tita passionately. "Do you think—do you *dare* to think that—"

"I refuse to tell you what I think. There is one thing more, however, to be said; you shall give up all further intercourse with your cousin."

Now, Tita had decided, during her late interview with Tom, that she would never willingly see him again; but here and thus to be *ordered* to do her own desire is more than she can bear.

"No, I shall not do that," says she.

"You *shall*," says Rylton, whose temper is now beyond his control.

"I shall *not*." Tita is standing back from him, her small flower-like head uplifted, her eyes on fire. "Oh, coward!" cries she. "You do right to speak to me like this—to me, who have no one to help me."

"You—you!" interrupts he. "Where is Hescott, then?"

His voice, his tone, his whole air, is one great insult.

Tita stands for one moment like a marble thing transfixed; then:

"Tom is not *here*," says she slowly, contemptuously, and with great meaning. "If he were— In the meantime, I am in your power, so far that I must listen to you. There is no one to help me. I haven't a living soul in the wide world to stand by me, and you know it."

Here the door is thrown open, and Margaret comes in, pale, uneasy. By a mere chance she had left her room to place a letter for the early post in the box in the corridor outside, and had then seen Hescott going down the corridor (unconscious of Rylton coming up behind him)—had seen the latter's rather rough impelling of Tita into her bedroom, and— And afraid of consequences, she had at last smothered her dreadful repugnance to interfering with other people's business, and had gone swiftly to Tita's door. Even then she was on the point of giving up—of being false to her principles—when Tita's voice, a little high, a little strained, had frightened her. It had been followed by an angry answer from Rylton. Margaret opened the door and went in.

Tita is standing with her back to a small table, her hands behind her, resting upon it, steadying her. She is facing Rylton, and every one of her small beautiful features breathes defiance—a defiance which seems to madden Rylton. His face is terribly white, and he has caught his under lip with his teeth—a bad sign with him.

"Maurice, it is not her fault. Tita, forgive me! I heard—I saw—I feared something." The gentle Margaret seems all broken up, and very agitated. After a pause, as if to draw her breath—a pause not

interrupted, so great is the amazement of the two belligerents before her et her so sudden appearance—she addresses herself solely to Sir Maurice. "She had been with me," she begins. "It was the merest chance her leaving me just then; she was going to her own room."

But Tita cuts he short.

"I forbid you, Margaret!" cries she violently. "Be silent! I tell you I will not have myself either excused or explained. Do not arrange a defence for me. I will not be defended."

"Let me explain, my dearest—*do* let me explain," entreats Margaret earnestly. "It is for your good."

"It is not; and even if it were, I should not allow it. Besides, there is nothing to explain. I was only bidding good-bye to Tom!" She pauses, and tears spring to her eyes—tears half angry, half remorseful. "Oh, *poor* Tom!" cries she. "*He* loves me!" Her breast rises and falls rapidly, and, after a struggle with herself, she bursts out crying. "He was my *one* friend, I think! And I was so unkind to him! I told him I should never ask him here again! I was abominable to him! And all for nothing—nothing at all. Only because he said he—*loved me!*"

She is sobbing passionately now.

"Tita," says Rylton; he takes a step towards her.

"As for you," cries she wildly, putting up her hands as if to keep him far from her, "I wish I had been born a *beggar*. Then," slowly, and in a voice vibrating with scorn—"then I should not have been chosen by *you!*"

The cut goes home. For a second Rylton winces, then his fingers close even more tightly over the paper he is holding, and a cynical smile crosses his lips.

"You believe much in money," says he.

"I have reason to do so," coldly. The strange smile on his lips has caught her attention, and has killed the more vehement form of her passion. "It induced you to marry me! Your mother told me so!"

"Did she?" He is smiling still. "Well, all that is at an end." Something in his voice makes Margaret look quickly at him, and he flings the letter he has been crushing in his hand to her. "Read that!" says he.

Margaret catches it, opens it hurriedly, and reads. Her face grows very pale. She looks up.

"You got it?"

"By the night mail, two hours ago."

"What is it?" demands Tita imperiously.

She had taken no notice of his giving the letter to Margaret; but now she is sure that some mystery lies in it—a mystery that has something to do with her.

Margaret regards her piteously.

"My dear—I—"

She breaks down, and looks now at Rylton as if reproaching him for having cast this task upon her shoulders. Rylton shakes his head.

"From you—it will be kinder," says he.

"*What* is it?" asks Tita again, taking a step towards Margaret, and holding out her hand for the letter.

"Your money!" falters Margaret nervously.

"Yes—yes!"

"*It is all gone!*"

"Gone?"

"All! There is nothing left," says Margaret, pale as ashes.

"Gone!" Tita repeats the word once or twice, as a child might, trying to learn a new syllable; she seems a little stunned. Then suddenly her whole face grows bright; it wakes into a new life as it were. "Is it *all* gone?" asks she.

"Yes, my dearest girl, I am afraid so. But you must not be unhappy, Tita; I——"

"Oh, *unhappy!*" cries the girl, in a high clear tone, one full of fresh, sweet courage and delight. She walks straight up to Rylton. "*Now I can leave you!*" says she.

If she had been planning a revenge, she could hardly have arranged it better. Rylton looks back at her. He is silent, but she reads the disturbance of his soul in his firmly shut mouth, and the little, quick, flittering frown that draws his brows together in momentary rapidity. He had thought many things of her, but that she should hail with rapture the ruin that seemed to give her a chance of escape from him—*that* thought had not been his.

In a moment, however, he has pulled himself together. He tells himself he sees at once the right course to pursue. In other words, he has decided on conquering her.

"You shall certainly not do that," says he icily.

"I shall, however." She almost laughs as she steps back from him, and up to Margaret. There is an air about her as though she had snapped her pretty fingers in his face. "Now you must help me to gain my living," cries she gaily. "'A child of the people' (I quote your mother again)," smiling at Rylton, "I will go back to the people."

"It is not quite so bad as that," says Margaret, who has been studying the fatal letter with a view of tearing *some* good out of it. "It seems that when these speculations that your uncle made with your money all failed—and these failures have been going on for years—that still he tried to keep up his credit with you by—by sacrificing all his own money, and——"

"Poor old Uncle George," says the girl softly. For the first time she seems sorry for the misfortune that has fallen on her house. "Perhaps I can go to him, and help him. I dare say, now he is down in the world, he might be a little kinder to me."

"Impossible, Tita. He has gone abroad," says Margaret, who, as she tells herself miserably, is developing into a determined liar!

Uncle George, so runs the letter, has committed suicide. Truly he has gone abroad with a vengeance, and no man knoweth whither.

Tita sighs. It is, to tell truth, a sigh of relief. Uncle George had not been palatable to her.

"Well, I can earn something."

"You need not that," says Margaret. "It seems there is from two to three hundred a year left to you that cannot be disputed. It should be sufficient to——"

"I can live on *half* that!" cries Tita eagerly.

"You shall live with me," says Rylton, breaking in with cold anger. "You are my wife. You shall not leave me."

Tita makes a little gesture.

"Why waste time over it?" says she. "I shall leave you as soon as ever I can. To-morrow. I am afraid it is too late to-night. I should have gone any way, after what you said to me just now——"

"After what *he* said to you, you mean!" bursts in Rylton violently, losing all control over his temper. "You were going with him——"

"*Maurice!*" Margaret has stepped between them. "How *dare* you speak to her like that?" says she, her calm, kind face transfigured. "I hope to see you ashamed of yourself to-morrow. Be quiet, Tita. *I* will look after you." She turns again hurriedly to Rylton, who is looking very white and breathing heavily, with his eyes immovably fixed on Tita. "She will come with me—to my house to-morrow," says Margaret. "You will, Tita?"

"Oh yes, to you!" cries Tita, running to her, and flinging herself into her arms. "You are the only one who—of *his* family"—with a baleful glance at Rylton over her shoulder—"who has been kind to me!"

The guests have all gone! The morning train had swallowed up the Hescotts, and the eleven o'clock had disposed of the rest. Only the Dowager Lady Rylton and Margaret still remain.

The latter has decided on going by the evening train and taking Tita with her, deeming it best to separate husband and wife for a little while, until the calamity be overpast for a few weeks, at all events. As for Tessie, she had come with a determination to linger on until Christmas with her son and his wife, though asked for three weeks only; and it is her son's pleasing task to be obliged now to explain to her why and wherefore she must go back at once to the old home—to The Place—to the old home partially saved from ruin by his unhappy marriage, and now doomed to a sure destruction because of the loss of the fortune that had been the primary motive in the making of that marriage.

Rylton got through the telling of his lamentable tale more easily than he could have supposed possible. Whilst walking up the stairs to his mother's room, he had tried to compose certain forms of speech that might let the whole affair "down easy," to quote from the modern English language, but had failed utterly. Yet, when on the spot, he had run glibly through it all—coldly—almost without feeling. And his mother had heard him as coldly, until she learned all hope was at an end—as far as Tita's thousands were concerned.

Then she gave way to hysterics!

And even now, when, by the help of a wet sponge and a maid and a bottle of champagne, he has pulled her through, sufficient at all events to be able to talk rationally, she is still in the very lowest depths of despair.

"And to think you should have sacrificed yourself for a mere 'person' like that! A little"—sob—"wretched *nobody*. Oh! if your father could only see you now! A creature of no family, no manners, no —"

"Who are you talking of, mother? My father?"

"If you can be frivolous at this moment, Maurice, you can be frivolous for ever," says his mother, weeping (presumably) behind her little lace rag, her voice like a dagger.

"I'm far from that," says Maurice, flinging himself into a chair. "But the fact is, mother, let us leave Tita out of this affair. I object to hearing her—er—criticised by you—or anyone."

Tessie weeps afresh.

"The soul of honour," breathes she, apostrophizing the ceiling. "But I cannot let you, Maurice, be so deceived by a mere swindler such as she is. Do you for a moment imagine—ah yes!" throwing up her hands and plainly admiring Maurice with great fervour—"you probably do; you have a soul, Maurice, a great soul, inherited from *me!* But I shall not permit that little vulgar fraud of a girl to demoralize it. Of *course* she knew all about her uncle's speculations—and married you gladly, knowing what the end would be. Oh! my poor boy!"

Lady Rylton retires again behind her lace rag.

"That will do," says Maurice curtly.

It seems almost funny to him that he, who has been condemning Tita all the night and morning in his heart, can now be so violently angry with another fellow-creature for decrying her.

"Of course, I know. I understand," says Tessie, still weeping, "it is always so painful to know that one has been thoroughly taken in. No wonder you can't listen even to your own mother with common patience. I excuse you, Maurice. I often had to excuse your dear father. Both you and he were a little weak—a little noble, perhaps—but well, you required someone to look after you. And I—poor, *poor* I—what could I do?" Tessie shakes her head mournfully from side to side. "And as for this miserable little deception——"

"Look here, mother——"

"Oh! I know, I know. It is not the nice thing to do, of course, but alone with one's only son one may waive a point and condole with him on the abominable qualities of the woman he has chosen to be his wife—— Dear Maurice, you should be careful. Didn't you *see* that footstool? I quite thought you kicked it. And her laugh. Do you know it used to hurt me?"

"Not until after our marriage, however," says Rylton, who is now a little strung.

"Oh! no wonder you reproach me," says his mother. "I shall for ever reproach myself. *Such* a person—without a penny—to fling herself into your arms."

"Ah! she had a penny then," says Maurice.

"Then? Yes! Do you think I should have countenanced your marriage otherwise?"

"My dear mother, of course not. I know you too well for that."

His irony is thrown away upon Tessie, who is not equal to these drags upon her intellect, and as a fact Rylton is scarcely listening to her; his whole soul is in a turmoil. He scarcely knows what he wants or what he does not want—whom he loves or hates. Only Tita—Tita is always before him; and as hate is stronger than love, as some folk have it (though they lie), he believes that all his thoughts grow with a cruel persistence of detestation towards the small, ill-tempered child whom he has married.

"At all events *she* knew what she was about," says Tessie, flinging down her handkerchief and speaking with a touch of viciousness. "She knew perfectly how she stood with her wretched uncle before she married you. No doubt they arranged it between them. She was fully aware of the state of her finances, and so was the uncle. So glad that miserable old person is out of the way for ever, of making young men of family marry young women of no family, who have not even money to recommend them. I must say your—*I shudder* to utter the word, Maurice—your wife—is as thoroughly dishonest a person as—" Tessie pauses, and casts a furtive glance at him. "After all, there may be a hope for you, Maurice. That cousin! So *prononcée* the whole thing—so unmistakable. And once a divorce was established—"

She never knew afterwards what really happened. Perhaps, after all, nothing happened—nothing material; but what she does know is that Maurice is standing before her, looking like a demon.

"D—n it!" says he. His temper is *very* bad sometimes. "Can't you *see* that I won't have a word said against her?"

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW MATTERS COME TO A CLIMAX; AND HOW TITA TELLS MAURICE MANY THINGS THAT STING HIM SHARPLY; AND HOW HE LAYS HANDS UPON HER; AND HOW THE LAST ADIEUX ARE SAID.

"So you have made up your mind," says Maurice, looking at his wife with a glance as full of coldness as it is of rage. "You see your way? It is for ever, remember. You decide on leaving me?"

"Why should I stay?" says Tita.

There is evidently no idea of "staying" about her; she is dressed for a journey, with care—*great* care—but with all the air of one who is going away for a long, long time. She is exquisitely dressed; the soft gray costume, trimmed with costly furs, sets off her bijou figure to perfection, and her soft, dainty curls show coquettishly from beneath her fur cap. Her eyes are shining like stars; her lips have taken a slightly malicious curve; her rounded chin, soft and white as a baby's, is delicately tilted. She is looking lovely. "Why should I stay?" Her question seems to beat upon his brain. He could have answered it, perhaps, had pride permitted him, but pride is a great tyrant, and rules with an iron rod. And, besides, even if he had answered, *she* has a tyrant, too—her own pride. As a fact we all have these tyrants, and it is surprising how we hug them to our breasts.

"Why should I stay?" says Tita. "All you wanted from me is gone; now I go too. You should rejoice. If you have lost in one way you have gained in another. You will never see me or my money again!"

The bitterness in the young voice, the hatred in the young eyes, is terrible.

For a full minute Rylton remains silent. The mind is a strange thing, not to be controlled, full of vagaries, and now, for no reason whatever, as it seems to him, it has run back to his wedding morning. Is *this* the careless, idle, little tomboy who had stood before the altar—the little girl he had assured himself he could mould to his will?

"You forget," says he coldly, "that you are married to me. It is not so simple a matter as you seem to imagine for a wife to throw off her marriage yoke."

"Yoke! What a good word that is!" says Tita, with the air of one making a discovery. Then lightly, "Pouf! Nonsense! I'll show you how easy it is! And as for that——" Again her mood changes. "Don't go in for that sort of thing," says she contemptuously. "Be honest with me now, at the last. You know you will be as glad to get rid of me, as I shall be to be rid of you."

"Speak for yourself," says Rylton slowly. His eyes are on the ground. "I have not said I shall be glad to get rid of you."

"No, I have said it for you. I have befriended you to the very end; and if you *will* be a hypocrite, why —*be it!*" cries she gaily.

She throws up her hands with an airy little gesture, full of grace, and anger, and something else difficult to describe, but that certainly is devoid of any sort of mirth.

"Hypocrite or not, remember this," says Maurice, "it is *you* who have decided on a separation."

"Yes; I—I." She bursts out laughing. "'Alone I did it!' To-day I set you free!"

"Free!"

"Ah, not so free as I *would* make you!" shaking her head.

He looks at her.

"*You* are honest, at all events," says he bitterly; then, after a moment, "You approve, then, on the step you are taking?"

Tita makes a gesture of impatience.

"What *will* you have?" says she. "What do you find fault with now? Have I not behaved well? Have I not behaved beautifully? I stayed with you as long as I had any money—the money for which you gave me your—title. I cannot flatter myself that you gave me more than that for it. Probably you gave me too much. And so now, when the money is gone, the bargain is off, and"—with a shrug of her shoulders, and the saucy glance of a naughty child from under her long lashes—"I am off too! Isn't that being good?"

"Have you no charity?" says he. A dark red flush has crimsoned his forehead. "What a character you give me! Do you think I have no heart?"

"Oh, *your* heart!" says she gaily. "I don't think you need to be unhappy about it. It will do. You say I am honest, and one thing honestly I do regret, that I should have unwittingly tempted you to marry me because of my money—when now it has all dropped overboard. If I had only known how you regarded it, I——"

"That infernal money!" says he violently.

There is almost a groan in his voice. His eyes are fixed upon her; he is wondering at her. What a child she looks in her pretty frock! What an unreasonable child! But what a charm in the angry eyes of her, the defiance of her whole air! There is something that maddens him in the scornful shrug of her dainty shoulders.

"Oh yes—yes—of course!" says she, bringing the little disdainful shrug into full requisition now. "No wonder you abuse it, poor thing! *But* for that 'infernal money,' you would never have dreamed of marrying me, and now that it is gone—gone——" She pauses. "Oh," sharply, "I am *glad* it is gone! It opens for me a way to leave you!"

Rylton strides forward, and seizes her by both her arms.

"Supposing I don't *let* you go!" says he.

"I shan't ask your permission," returns she calmly, submitting to his violent pressure without a wince—a pressure unmeant—unknown by him, to do him justice. "And I need not! Think of the detestable life we have lived together! Don't I know that you hated it as much as I did—perhaps more! No," softly. "Not *more!*"

Rylton loosens his hold of her, and steps back. If she had said a thousand words, they could not have brought her meaning more forcibly home to him than these two, "Not *more.*"

"Oh, think!" cries she, clasping her hands in a sort of ecstasy. "To-day—this very day—in an hour or so, we shall be miles, and miles, and *miles* away from each other! What more can you desire?"

Rylton brings his hand down upon the table before him.

"Nothing!" returns he hoarsely. "I would rather die than subject myself to the misery I have been enduring with you. I would, by heaven!"

"Ah, you speak the truth at last," says she. "Well"—she moves towards him and holds out her hand—"now that you have spoken, I am satisfied. Good-bye; I hope I shall never see you again!"

He thrusts her hand aside.

"I shall remember that," says he.

"That was why I said it," returns she. She has flung up her head, angered a little perhaps even in this desperate moment at his rejection of her hand. Her eyes are gleaming. Her beauty seems to shine out—to grow upon him. Maurice regards her curiously even now—now, when she is going for ever. *How* can so bitter a spirit dwell in so sweet a temple? "Will you not say good-bye, then?" says she.

"No—never."

She turns away deliberately and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW MARGARET STEPS INTO THE BREACH, AND LEARNS THAT ALL PEACEMAKERS ARE NOT BLESSED.

"It is quite the wisest thing to be done at present," says Margaret. "I do hope, Maurice, you will not object to the arrangement."

She regards him anxiously. It is an hour later, and the carriage has been ordered to be at the door in fifteen minutes. Margaret has come to bid Maurice good-bye, and say a few words to him.

"*I!* What have I got to do with it?" he laughs contemptuously. "*She* has arranged everything. The farther she goes from me the better. I am sorry that the resting-place she has chosen is so near. Park Lane as usual, I suppose, Margaret? But it won't last, my dear girl. She will go farther afield soon."

"You think her fickle, I don't," says Margaret gravely. "You have misjudged her all along. I believe she loves me. I believe," slowly, "she has a great capacity for loving."

"Are you alluding to her capacity for loving Mr. Hescott?"

"That is unworthy of you," says his cousin. She rises. "I have only a few moments—and your wife is coming with me, and I would say one word to you before I go. She is young—*very* young. She is a mere child."

"She is old enough, I presume, to know right from wrong."

"She is the youngest creature I know," persists Margaret, in her sweet angelic way, that is all charity, all kindness and all forbearance. "And what a little fairy of a thing! A man should have patience with her. *Have* patience, Maurice."

"Oh! All you women support each other," says he, frowning. "You wish me to believe that because Nature has built her in a smaller mould than other women, I should therefore condone her faults."

"Such pretty faults," says Margaret. "A little hot temper, a little sauciness, a little petulance—what more?"

Rylton's lip curls.

"If you are such a devotee at her shrine as all that comes to, there is nothing more to be said. Her flirtation with her cousin——"

"*Was* it a flirtation?"

"There are new names for things every day. Give it the new name and be done with it."

"There can be no new name for a mere imagination. I don't believe she ever had any—any love affair with Mr. Hescott. I don't really, and," boldly, "in your heart I don't think you believe it either. No, don't

turn away, *don't*. It is for your sake I speak, because I have always your interest at heart; Maurice, I entreat you to pause, to think. Is all the fault on Tita's side? Have you loved her as she should be loved?—that little, quick, enthusiastic creature. Where has your heart been since your marriage!"

"You go very far," says Rylton, pale, cold.

"I know; I know. And I am only a cousin, a mere nobody. But I love the child, and I *must* speak. You will hate me for it, perhaps, but why has Marian been here?"

"Tita asked her."

"Is that the whole truth?"

"No; the half," says Sir Maurice. He rouses himself from the lethargy into which he has fallen, and looks at Margaret. "I promised Marian an invitation here; I asked Tita for that invitation later. Marian came. I believed there would be harm in her coming, and I steeled myself against it. I tell you, Margaret—I tell you, and you only—that when she came the harm—was—well"—straightening himself—"there was *no* harm. All at once I found I did not care. My love for her seemed dead. It was terrible, but it was the fact; I seemed to care for nothing—nothing at all. Margaret, believe me, it was all dead. I tell you this, that the night when I discovered that, I longed for death as a solution of my misery. To care for nothing—nothing!"

"There was something," says Margaret. "There was Tita!"

"Was there?"

"Certainly there was."

"She has proved it," says Rylton, breaking into a sort of heart-broken mirth.

"She is angry now," says Margaret eagerly. "She is very naturally—unhinged; and she has been told ___"

"By my mother?"

"Yes. That was unfortunate. She—Tessie—your mother," hastily, "should not have told her."

"After all, I'm glad she did," says Rylton warmly. "What does it matter? And, at all events, it makes the thing clear to Tita. It is quite as well that she should know that I was a cur of the worst description when I asked her to marry me."

"You were never that," says his cousin, tears rising in her eyes. "You have been wrong in many ways, but I still believe in you, and I think that when you married Tita you meant to be true to her."

"I did, God knows!" says he. "It was the least I could do, considering how I had taken advantage of her. But she—"

"Well?" says Margaret.

"Hescott—"

"Oh, Maurice, don't! *Don't* be unjust over that. I tell you there was nothing in that. The poor child has been foolish, faulty, absurd, in many ways, but daylight is not sweeter or more pure. I tell you this as my last word. And, Maurice, in time—in a month or so—come and see us—"

"Us? *Her*? No!"

"Come and see me, then. I shall be, as you know, in town. *Do* come."

"Well, let me know first that she won't be there."

"I shall arrange for you not to see her, if you wish that," says Margaret, deeply grieved in her kind spirit. "But I hope that in time—"

"If you are hoping that Tita and I shall ever make it up again, you are the most hopeful person alive," says he. "No—I tell you plainly—I shall go to see you when she is away, never when she is with you."

"But why? You certainly can't believe she has any *tendresse* for Mr. Hescott."

"Why should I not believe it?" gloomily.

"Why should you? Dear Maurice, be sensible. I *know* that Tita cares nothing for him."

"How? Has she told you?"

"Not told me. But one can see."

"So can another one." He throws up his head suddenly, as if tired and altogether done. "There! I give it up," says he. "I have married an enigma, apparently, and my blood must be on my own head."

"You have married one of the sweetest girls on earth," says Margaret indignantly, stung by his nonchalant demeanour. "You are unworthy of her—you are not capable of understanding her." Rylton shrugs his shoulders. "In time—in *time*," says the gentle Margaret, now all aglow with anger, "you will learn her worth; but as it is——"

She moves towards the door. Rylton hurries to open it for her.

"I may come and see you?" asks he.

"If you will, but I shall certainly not send Tita out of the way to oblige you."

"Well, I shall take my chance."

"It is in your own hands."

Margaret sweeps past him. She is at this moment nearly as angry with him as Tita is.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW MARGARET AND TITA TREAD MANY PATHS; AND HOW FORTUNE, HAVING TURNED HER BACK ON TITA, SHOWS A SMILING FRONT TO MAURICE.

It is six months later, and now fair May has come to us on young and eager feet. On young feet barely born, and with a smile so slight that one dare hardly call it sunshine. At this moment a little gleam of it, just strong enough to make one dream of summer, but not enough to warm one, is stealing timidly through the windows of Margaret's smaller drawing-room in Park Lane.

She had taken Tita abroad almost immediately after the rupture at Oakdean, explaining to their mutual friends that it was necessary for Tita's health that she should winter in the south. An explanation received face to face with delicate appreciation and warm sympathy, and much laughed over later on. Poor old Margaret! As if one didn't *know*! As if one couldn't *see*! That cousin, you know! He was—he really *was* far too good-looking. And then this sudden loss of fortune! After all, these unequal marriages never *do*. Rylton plainly was tired of her, and when the money went—well, then Margaret took her off his hands. Of course Margaret was better than the cousin—more respectable. This brilliant bit of wit was received with much soft smothered mirth. But as for Rylton—he certainly had not come well out of it. A fellow should stick to his bargain, any way. He had married her for her money, and that gone, had shaken himself free. It was certainly playing it a little low down. By the way, wouldn't Mrs. Bethune be singing hymns over it all! *Such* a downfall to her rival! There was a good deal of gossip about it, here and there.

Mrs. Chichester, who has a heart somewhere in her lean, frivolous body, had come all the way up from Devonshire, where she was then falsely beguiling a most unlucky young curate, to see Margaret, on the latter's way through town, and express her sorrow for Tita. She had honestly liked Tita, and she said to Margaret many kindly things about her. So many, and so kindly indeed, that Margaret almost forgave her that reprehensible flirtation with Captain Marryatt. But then Margaret, at that time, knew nothing of the luckless curate!

The greatest surprise of all, however, came from old Miss Gower. Popularly she had been supposed to hate Tita, and resent her marriage with Rylton, who was a relative of hers; but five days after the *fiasco*, as Randal called it, Rylton had a letter from her that somewhat startled him. It was extremely abusive, and rather involved; but the meaning of it was that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and that Tita was too good for him. She wound up with a few very rude remarks directed at Mrs. Bethune, and a hope that Tita would stick to her determination to cast off the tyrant—*Man* (the capital was enormous), as personified by Maurice.

Rylton wasn't in the least annoyed by this letter; indeed, it somewhat puzzled him to find that he rather liked it, and he put it away in his private drawer, amongst the papers he cared for.

Margaret had taken Tita to Rome, and thence to Constantinople. She had kept her moving about from place to place, hoping to clear her mind of all past deadly thoughts by constant change. She had a hope that by breaking off all old associations, the girl might come to think of the past—and Maurice—in a more gentle, lenient light, and thus be prepared for a reconciliation in the future. To Margaret it seemed terrible that these two young people should be for ever apart—their lives ruined, their social position smirched.

A long separation from her own country—her own circle—might lead Tita to desire a return to it—a return to her husband and her home.

Alas! not to the old home, however. She might desire a return to that with all her soul, yet nothing would come of it. It was gone! Gone past recall! When Tita's affairs were wound up, it was found that all should be sold, not only her other two houses, but the old home—the one beloved of her childhood. Oakdean came to the hammer a month ago!

Indeed, out of all her large fortune only a bare £300 a year was saved for the poor little heiress of yesterday! When Tita was assured that even this small sum was honourably hers, she had insisted on her lawyers writing and offering half of it to Maurice—an offer I need hardly say refused. Maurice declined, naturally, but, unfortunately, very rudely, to touch a penny of hers.

So far Tita was protected from actual poverty—poverty was much closer to Maurice at this time than to her; and, indeed, being with Margaret, who loved her from her heart, and would hear no word of her leaving her, hardly felt the change in her position. The loss of the old home—of Oakdean—had been, so far as Margaret could see, the one thing that had deeply affected her. Of Maurice she would hardly talk at all, but of Oakdean she would talk by the hour.

The wheels of law grind slowly, and it was not until last month that the actual sale of her beautiful home took place. The news came to her when she and Margaret were at Berne on their homeward way, and she had quite broken down. She had cried terribly over it night and day—so much, indeed, that Margaret, who had been astonished at her strength of mind over her loss of fortune, now began to regard her as devoid of it altogether. For days and days she fretted, eating scarcely anything, caring for nothing. It was when Margaret was almost in despair about her that she grew better, and let herself be amused by the ordinary occurrences of the day.

As for Rylton, these past six months had been the fullest of his life. Time had made him his shuttlecock. Fortune had played with him. It had caught him when he was up in the world and flung him to the ground, and after that had seized him afresh, and sent him flying to a higher altitude than he had ever known before. As a fact, three months had not elapsed after his parting with his wife when his uncle (a comparatively young man) had died of typhoid fever, leaving him all his property.

It seemed the very irony of fate. A year ago, if he had had this money, he would not have even *seen* Tita. The marriage was an arrangement of his mother's, and now that he has got this money, of what good is it to him? His wife is gone, yet he still is wedded. The first sense of comfort he got from his newly-acquired fortune was the thought that he could now give Tita some of it.

But Tita would none of it! The very fact that their cases had been so suddenly and so marvellously reversed made her the more strong in her determination to spurn any gift from him. She was now sitting on the lowest rung of Fortune's ladder, whilst he stood at the top; but, for all that, she would take nothing from him. Rylton wrote to Margaret, who scolded Tita vigorously to no end; and so the matter stood. The first instalment of a very magnificent allowance was paid into Tita's bank, and rested there untouched, doing no good to anybody.

"It is senseless! As his wife, you are entitled to some of his money. It is not a gift," said Margaret angrily.

But Tita had laughed, and tore his letter to Margaret in two.

"He wouldn't take my small gift," said she, alluding to that offer of hers of the half of her tiny income. "And now it does me *good* to be able to refuse his big one."

"But it isn't a gift; it is your right," Margaret urged again; but all in vain.

Now they are back once more in England. Ten days ago they arrived, and are this morning in Margaret's pretty room that is half filled with growing plants, moving about from this flower to that, and feeling unconsciously little thrills of delight in the fresh sweetness of the morning.

"Spring goeth all in white,
Crowned with milk-white May;

In fleecy flocks of light,
O'er heaven the white clouds stray.

"White butterflies in the air,
White daisies prank the ground;
The cherry and the hoary pear
Scatter their snow around."

Well, there are no cherry-trees or hoary pear-trees here, but the perfume of the delicate lilac comes to them from the Park, telling them that spring is reigning, even in this dusty old city, with a right royal gaiety.

Twice during these ten days Rylton has called, always asking scrupulously for Margaret; and Margaret only has he seen. Hescott had called once, but Tita would not see him either, and poor Margaret had a rather dreadful interview with him. He had offered her in a frantic, foolish moment, half of all he was worth to be given from him to Tita, and Margaret had a good deal of difficulty in explaining to him that Tita, in reality, was as well off as any young woman need be. Margaret even exaggerated somewhat, and told him that she had a large sum lying idle in a bank—as indeed she had, considering Rylton paid in his princely allowance to her, with determined punctuality, every month, in spite of his knowledge of the fact that she would not touch it. Margaret suffered a good deal through Hescott, and was devoutly grateful when she learned the morning after his visit to her that he had started for a prolonged tour in South Africa. She learned this from himself in a somewhat incoherent letter, and a paragraph in the papers the day after set her mind at rest. Margaret was a Christian, or she might have found consolation in the thought that there are lions in South Africa!

She watched Tita anxiously for a day or two after this, but could not see that the girl was distressed at Tom's departure. She talked of him, indeed, very freely—always a good sign.

* * * * *

"Tita, do you hear the birds?" says Margaret, in quite a little excited way. "Come here to this window. How they sing!"

"Don't they!" says Tita rapturously.

Her face lights up, but presently she looks a little sad.

"It makes you long for the country?" asks Margaret gently, looking at her without seeming to do so.

"No," says Tita, shaking her head resolutely; and then: "Yes—yes. But I shall always hate to go to it now—now that the dear old home is gone."

"I wish I had been able to buy it!" says Margaret regretfully.

"Oh, Meg, don't go on like that! You—you who have been everything to me!"

"I wasn't rich enough," says Margaret ruefully; "and, at all events, I wasn't in time. I confess now I sold out some shares a little time ago with a view to getting it, but I was too late; it was bought—a private sale, they said."

"There is nothing I can say—nothing," says Tita, tears dimming her eyes. "Why are you so good to me? Oh, Meg! there is one, one thing—I love you, and love you, and love you!" She slips her soft arms round Margaret's neck, and presses her cheek to hers. There is moisture on Margaret's face when this little burst of gratitude has been accomplished. "I never loved anyone as I love you," says Tita.

"There is someone else you ought to love better, Tita."

"There is someone else I *hate*," returns Tita, with really astonishing promptitude.

"Well, about Oakdean," says Margaret quickly, appalled by this outbreak of wrath.

"There is nothing about it; it is gone," says Tita, in a forlorn sort of way; then: "I wonder who bought it?"

"I don't know. I asked, but I could not find out. Some rich merchant, no doubt."

"Well," sighing, "a rich merchant bought it before—my poor father—and to a rich merchant it has

gone. That is as it should be. Still, it was so pretty, so lovely, so homelike, that I wish——"

"What, darling?"

"That it had been burnt to the ground before anyone else got it," breaks out Tita, in a little storm of grief and despair.

"Yes, I know; I can feel with you," says Margaret, pressing her back into a chair, and hovering over her with loving touches and tender words. "But, after all, Tita, one has to give up things daily. It is life. Life is one long surrender."

"My surrender has been done in a bundle," says Tita indignantly. "Other people do their surrenders by degrees, year after year; but in *one* year I have lost everything—my home, my money, my husband."

Margaret notes with fear that she has put her husband last in the list of her losses.

"Not that I care a fig about Maurice," continues Tita, with a tilt of her chin that would have made any man admire her. "I was delighted to get rid of *him*." Then, glancing at Margaret, she flings her arms round her neck again. "No; don't look at me like that. I'm a wretch. But *really*, Margaret, you know that Maurice was a wretch, too!"

"Well, well!" says Margaret sadly. "It seems useless to defend Maurice—you know how sorry I am for you always," she goes on gently. "To come from riches to poverty is one of the worst things the word offers; but to be very rich is not well, Tita. It clogs the mind; it takes one away from the very meaning of life. Money hardens the soul; it keeps one away from touch with the inner circle of humanity—from the misery, the sorrow, the vice! It is bad to be too rich."

"Yet you are rich, Margaret!"

"Yet—yes; and it frightens me," says she, in a low tone.

Tita rubs her cheek softly against hers.

"Yet *you* are not far from the kingdom of God!" says she.

The little kittenish gesture and the solemn phrase! Margaret presses Tita to her. What a strange child she is! What a mixture!

"Neither are you, I trust," says she.

"So you see riches have got nothing to do with it," says Tita, breaking into a gay, irresistible little laugh.

Miss Knollys laughs too, in spite of herself, and then grows suddenly very grave. There is something she must say to Tita.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW MARGARET STARTS AS A SPECIAL PLEADER, AND IS MUCH WORSTED IN HER ARGUMENT; AND HOW A SIMPLE KNOCK AT THE HALL DOOR SCATTERS ONE BEING WHO DELIGHTS IN WAR.

"I think you ought to see your husband," says Margaret.

It is a bombshell! Tita withdraws her arms from round Margaret's neck and looks at her like one seeing her for the first time. It is plain to Margaret that she is very angry.

Poor Margaret! She feels torn in twain. Rylton, as has been said, had called twice during the past ten days, but on neither of those occasions had seen Tita. Tita, indeed, had obstinately refused to come downstairs, even though Margaret had gone up to fetch her. Margaret had not forgotten that occasion. She had found the girl in her room.

"Never, never, never!" said Tita, in answer to all her entreaties, who had screwed herself into the farthest corner of her room between a wardrobe and a table—a most uncomfortable position, but one possessed of certain advantages. It would be difficult, for example, to dislodge her from it. And she gave Margaret the impression, as she entered the room, that she thought force was about to be resorted to.

"It is your duty to come downstairs and see him," Margaret had said.

She always brought in poor Duty, who certainly must have been fagged to death at that time.

"I hate him!" said Tita rebelliously, and now with increased venom, as she saw that Margaret only had come to the assault. "Go down and tell him that."

"This is dreadful," said poor Margaret, going to the door.

But even now the little miscreant wedged in between the furniture was not satisfied.

"Tell him I hope I'll never see him again!" said she, calling it out loudly as though afraid Margaret might not hear and deliver her words.

"I shall certainly deliver no such message," said the latter, pausing on the threshold and waxing wroth. Even the worm will turn, they say, though I confess I never saw one that did. "You can tell him that yourself, some day, when you see him!"

But this parting shaft had only made Tita laugh. "*See him!* She would die first!"

Margaret had gone down with a modified edition of this *rencontre* to Rylton, and Rylton had shrugged his shoulders. He could not disguise from Margaret the fact, however, that he was chagrined. He had seen through the modifying, of course, and had laughed—not very merrily—and told Margaret not to ruin her conscience on his account. He had lived with Tita long enough to know the sort of message she would be sure to send.

Margaret mumbled something after that, never very clear to either of them, and Rylton had gone on to say that he was going down to the country for a month. He was starting on Monday next. He had said all that on Thursday, and this is Tuesday. There is a sense of relief, yet of regret, in Margaret's heart as she tells herself that he is well out of town. But *now*, certainly, is the time to work on Tita's sense of right and wrong. Rylton will come back at the end of the month, and when he does, surely—surely his wife should be willing to, at all events, receive him as a friend. The gossip surrounding these two people, so dear to her, is distressing to Margaret, and she would gladly have put an end to it. The whole thing, too, is so useless, so senseless. And as for that affair of Marian's Bethune's—she has no belief in that. It has blown over—is dead. Killed—by time.

"See him?" says Tita at last, stammering.

"Yes, when he comes back. You have a month to think about it. He has gone to the country."

"A very good thing too," says Tita, with a shrug of her shoulders.
"I hope he will stay there."

"But he won't," says Margaret in despair. "He returns to town in June. Tita, I hope—I do hope you will be sensible, and consent to see him then."

"Does he want to see me?" asks Tita.

Here Margaret is posed. Rylton had certainly *known*, that day she had gone up to Tita's room to bring her down, what her errand was, but he had not asked her to go upon it. He had expressed no desire, had shown no wish for a meeting with his wife.

"My dear—I—"

"Ah, you make a bad liar, Meg!" says Tita; "you ought to throw up the appointment. You aren't earning your salary honestly. And, besides, it doesn't matter. Even if he were dying to see me, I should still rather die than see him."

"That is not a right spirit, to—"

"I expect my spirit is as right as his," says Tita rebelliously, "and," with a sudden burst of indignation that does away with all sense of her duty to her language, "a thousand times righter for the matter of that. No, Margaret! No—no—no! I will *not* see him. Do you think I ever forget—"

"I had hoped, dearest, that—"

"It is useless to hope. *What* woman would forgive it? I knew he married me without loving me. That was all fair! He told me that. What he did not tell me was the vital thing—that he loved someone else."

"You should never have married him when he told you he did not love you."

"Why not?" warmly. "I knew nothing of love; I thought he knew nothing of it either. Love seemed to me a stupid sort of thing (it seems so still). I said to myself that a nice strong friendship would be sufficient for me——"

"Well?"

"Well, so it would—only he felt no friendship. He felt nothing but his love for that odious woman! I couldn't stand that."

"You stood it for a long time, Tita—if it ever existed."

"Yes; I know. I didn't seem to care much at first, but when he grew rude to me about Tom—— Well, I knew what *that* meant."

"If you knew, you should have kept your cousin at a greater distance."

"Nonsense, Margaret! what do you mean by that?" Tita has turned a pair of lustrous eyes upon her—eyes lit by the fire of battle—not battle with Margaret, however, but with memory. "You honestly think that he believed I was in love with Tom?"

"I do. And I think he was jealous."

Tita bursts out laughing. There is little music in her mirth.

"And now I'll tell you what *I* think. That he was *glad* to pretend to believe I was in love with Tom, because he hoped to get rid of me, and after that to marry his cousin."

"Tita! I shall not listen to you if you say such things. How dare you even think them? Maurice is incapable of such a design."

"In my opinion, he is capable of anything," retorts Maurice's wife, without a trace of repentance. She looks long at Margaret, and then dropping gracefully upon a *pouf* at Margaret's feet, says sweetly, "He's a beast!"

"Oh, Tita! I don't know *why* I love you," says Margaret, with terrible reproach.

At this Tita springs to her feet, and flings her arms round Miss Knollys. Presently she leans back and looks at her again, still, however, holding her with her arms. Her small face, so woeful a while ago, is now wreathed in smiles; it even suggests itself to Margaret that she is with difficulty suppressing a wild outbreak of mirth—a suppression meant, no doubt, as a concession to Margaret's feelings.

"I'll tell you," whispers she. "You love me because you would be the most ungrateful wretch on earth unless you did. You give me *some* of your love; I give you all mine. I have no one else."

"That is your own fault," says Margaret, still trying to scold her, actually believing she is doing it, whilst with her eyes and mouth she is smiling at her.

"Not another word, not one," says Tita. "And promise me you won't ask me to see him again. I hate him! He sets my nerves on edge. I think he is actually *ugly*."

"I think you must have forgotten what he is like by this time."

"No, I don't. One doesn't forget a nightmare in a hurry."

"Tita, really——"

"There! I'll be good. I'll consign him to the lowest depths and never dig him up again. And so he has left town? What a blessed relief! Now I can go out and enjoy myself. *Let* us go out, Meg! Let us——*what's that?*"

She stands transfixed in the middle of the room, Margaret opposite her. Both seem stricken into marble.

A knock at the door, loud, sharp, resounding—a knock well known to both.

"And you *said* he was gone to the country," says Tita, in a low whisper filled with deepest suspicions.

"He said so. I believed it. It must be a mistake," says Margaret.

"He *certainly* said so."

They have lost some moments over their fear and astonishment. The sound of a rapidly approaching

footstep, quite as well known to them as the knock, rouses both to a sense of desperation.

"What on earth shall I do?" says Tita, who is now as white as a sheet.

"Stay and see him," says Margaret, with sudden inspiration.

"Stay! Do you think I should stay for one moment in the room with him? No! I shall go in there," pointing to the next room that opens out of this with folding-doors, "and wait until he goes away."

She has hardly time to reach this seclusion when the door is thrown wide, and Sir Maurice is announced.

"Nobody with you?" says he, glancing somewhat expectantly around him. "I fancied I heard someone. So glad to find you alone!"

"Yes—yes—perhaps it is better," says Margaret vaguely, absently, thinking always of the little firebrand in that room beyond, but so near, so fatally near.

"Better? You mean—"

"Well, I mean that Tita has only just left the room," says Margaret desperately.

"She—is in there, then?" pointing towards the folding-doors.

"Yes. *Do* speak low. You know she—I can't disguise from you, Maurice, that she—"

Margaret hesitates.

"Hates me? I'm quite aware of that." A long pause. "She is well, I hope?" frigidly.

"I think so. She looks well, lovely indeed—a little pale, perhaps. Maurice," leaning across and whispering cautiously, "why don't you try to make a reconciliation of some sort? A beginning might lead to the happiest results, and I am sure you do care for her—and—*do* try and make up with her."

"You must be out of your mind!" says Maurice, springing to his feet, and to poor Margaret's abject fear speaking at the top of his lungs. "With *her*, when she deliberately deserted me of her own accord—when—"

"Oh, hush, hush!" says Margaret in an agony. She makes wild signs to him, pointing towards the closed doors as she does so. A nice girl, we all know, would rather *die* than put her ear to a keyhole, even if by doing so she could save her neck from the scaffold; but the very best of girls might by chance be leaning against a door through the chinks of which sounds might enter from the room beyond it. "She'll *hear* you!" gasps Margaret.

"I don't care if she does," says Maurice indignantly, but he calms down for all that, and consents to sit in a chair as far from the folding-doors as possible. "You have misjudged me all through," says he.

"I think not—I hope not. But I will say, Maurice, that I think you began your marriage badly, and—you should not have—"

"Have what?"

"Asked Marian to stay with you."

"That was"—gloomily—"a mistake. I admit that. But have *I* nothing to complain of?"

"Nothing, I honestly believe."

Her tone is so honest (Margaret herself is so sweetly honest all through) that he remains silent for a moment. It is, however, a constrained silence. The knowledge that Tita is standing or sitting, laughing or frowning, behind those boards over there, disturbs him in spite of himself.

"Well, I have often thought that, too," says he, "and yet I have often thought—the other thing. At all events, you cannot deny that *he* was in love with her."

"Why should I deny that? To me"—with a reproachful glance at him—"she seems like one with whom many might be in love."

"Oh, you are a partisan!" says he irritably, rising abruptly, and preparing to pace the room.

Margaret catches his coat as he goes by her.

"I entreat, I implore you to be quiet. It is so *slight* a partition," says she. "Do sit down like a dear boy and talk softly, unless"—wistfully and evidently hopefully—"you want to go away."

"Well, I don't," says he grimly.

He reseats himself. An extraordinary fascination keeps him in this room, even in face of the fact that the mistress of it is plainly longing for his departure. She has even openly hinted at it. And the fascination? It lies there behind the folding-doors. There is no romance in it, he tells himself; it is rather the feeling of an enemy who knows his foe to be close by. He turns to Margaret.

"Why did she refuse that money?"

"Why did you refuse hers?"

"Pshaw! You're evading the question. To take half of her little pittance! I wonder you can even suggest the thing. It—it is almost an insult," says he, reddening to his brows.

"I didn't mean it," says Margaret quickly, the more so that she thinks he is going to walk the room again. "Of course you could not have taken it."

"And yet I did take her money," says he miserably; "I wish to heaven now I hadn't. *Then* it seemed a fair exchange—her money for my title; it is done every day, and no one thinks anything of it—but now — It was a most cursed thing," says he.

"It would have been nothing—nothing," says Margaret eagerly, "if you had been heart-whole. But to marry her, loving another, that was wrong—unpardonable—"

"Unpardonable!" He looks at her with a start. What does she mean? Is he beyond pardon, indeed? Pardon from—— "That's all over," says he.

"It wasn't over *then!*"

"I don't know——" He gets up and walks to the window in an agitated fashion, and then back again. "Margaret, I don't believe I ever loved her."

Margaret stares at him.

"You are talking of Marian?"

"Yes; Marian. If I did love her, then there is no such thing as love—love the eternal—because I love her no longer."

"It is not that," says Margaret; "but love can be killed. Poor love!" she sighed. "Marian of her own accord has killed yours."

There is a long pause; then: "Well, I'm glad of it," says he.

He lifts his arms high above his head, as a man might who yawns, or a man might who has all at once recognised that he is rid of a great encumbrance.

"I suppose you did not come here to discuss your love affairs with Marian," says Margaret, a little coldly.

In a strange sort of way she had liked Marian, and she knew that Marian, in a strange sort of way, clung to *her*. And, besides, to say love could be killed! It was tantamount to saying love could die! Has *her* love died? Colonel Neilson had been with her a good deal since her return to town, and there had been moments of heart-burning, when she had searched her heart indeed, and found it wanting—wanting in its fixed determination to be true for ever to the dear dead beloved. And such a miserable wanting, a mere craving to be as others are—to live in the life of another, to know the warmth, the *breath* of the world's sunshine—to love, and be loved again.

No wonder Margaret is angry with Rylton for bringing all these delinquencies into the light of certainty.

"No," says Sir Maurice moodily. "I came here to see you."

"You told me you intended leaving town yesterday."

"Yes, I know. I meant it. But I've changed my mind about stopping in the country—at least, I'm

running down to The Place for the night to see after some business with the agent, but I'll be back to-morrow."

"Really, you must forgive me if I say I don't think much of your mind," says Margaret, who is still a little sore over her own reflections.

"I don't think much of it myself," says Rylton, with increasing gloom.

At this abject surrender Margaret's tender heart relents.

"I believe all you have told me," says she; "and I suppose I'm glad of it, although—Well, never mind that. Marian deserves no pity, but still——"

"Pshaw!" says he. "What has Marian got to do with it? Marian never cared *that* about me." He makes an expressive movement with his fingers—a little snap. "I know now that Marian only played with me. I amused her. I was the plaything of an hour."

"You wrong her there, Maurice."

"Do I? How? They tell us"—with a bitter smile—"that if a woman loves a man she will cling to him through all things—poverty, ill-repute, even crime. But poverty, the least of these things, daunted *her*."

"She had known so *much* poverty——"

"Are you pleading *her* cause now?" says Maurice, with a slight smile. "You plead it badly. The very fact of her knowing it so well should not have deterred her from trying it again with the man she loved. I offered to throw up everything for her, to go abroad, to work, to wrestle with fortune for her sake, but she——" He stops, and draws a long breath. "Well, it is over," says he.

"That is. But your future life——"

"I'm not a favourite of gods, am I?" says he, laughing. "My future life! Well, I leave it to them. So Tita is looking well?"

"Yes; quite well. A little pale, I said."

"She never had much colour. She never speaks of me, I suppose?"

"Sometimes—yes."

Rylton looks down at the carpet, and then laughs a little awkwardly.

"I expect I had better not inquire into it," says he. "It is a general remark, yet it is all question."

"Of course, she remembers things," says Margaret nervously.

If he were to make another scene, to prance up and down the room, and talk at the top of his lungs, there is no knowing *what* may not happen, considering who is standing behind those folding-doors.

"We can all remember things," says Sir Maurice, rising and holding out his hand. He bids her good-bye. As he gets to the door he looks back. "Tell her I didn't like to keep her in durance vile longer than was necessary," says he.

With this parting shot, he goes down the stairs and out of the house.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW MARGARET MAKES A FEARFUL DISCOVERY; HOW SHE RUSHES TO THE RESCUE, BUT IS FAR FROM WELL RECEIVED; AND HOW TITA GIVES HERSELF AWAY, NOT ONCE, BUT TWICE.

Margaret, with a keen sense of relief, goes to the folding-doors, opens them cautiously, and looks in. A distinctly cold and cutting air greets her; she is aware at once that she is standing in a thorough draught. And where is Tita?

Good gracious! where *can* she have gone to? There is no exit from this room save through the next, where she and Rylton have been sitting—except by the chimney, or through one of the windows. For one awful moment it occurs to Miss Knollys that Tita might have flung herself out of a window.

She glances hurriedly to the window nearest her, and then sees something that makes her heart stand still.

Are those Tita's heels?

Margaret's mind is full of suicidal fears. She steps cautiously towards the open window—the window through which Tita's body is now flung. Tita's feet alone are in the room! Tita herself is suspended between heaven and earth, like Mahomet's coffin!

"Tita! what are you doing?" cries Margaret, laying a sudden hand upon the white sash that is encircling Lady Rylton's waist.

At this, the latter scrambles back into a more respectable position, and stares at Margaret with angry, shamed eyes, and cheeks like a "red, red rose."

"Good gracious!" says she. "Why, you very nearly threw me out of the window."

Now, this is so manifestly unfair that Margaret feels resentment. What had her action been? She had dragged Tita backwards into the room; she had not pushed her out, as the latter seemed to suggest.

"I quite thought you were trying to throw yourself out of the window," says Margaret, with emphasis. "What *have* you been doing?"

"Nothing—nothing," declares Tita airily, hurriedly. "The day is so lovely—you remember we were talking about it a while ago. I was—er—listening to the birds."

"Surely one need not hang one's self out of a window to listen to them," says Miss Knollys. "Why don't you confess the truth? You were looking at Maurice."

"Well, if you *will* have it," says Tita resentfully, "I *was*! I was curious to see if he was as ill-tempered looking as ever. I was foiled, however; I saw nothing but the back of his odious head."

"What a disappointment!" says Margaret, laughing with an irrepressible if rather unkind mirth.

"I dare say I shall get over it," coldly, with a distrustful glance at Margaret. "Well—how *is* he looking?"

At this Margaret laughs again.

"That was just what he asked about you!"

"About me!" frowning. "Fancy his asking anything about me! Well, and you said I was looking——"

"Lovely, but a little pale, as if you were pining."

"Margaret, you did *not* say that!"

"My dear child, of course I did. I am not sure about the pining, but I certainly said you looked pale. So you do. You couldn't expect me to tell a lie about it."

"I could indeed. I," with deep reproach, "would have told a dozen lies for you in a minute."

"Well, I don't want you to," says Miss Knollys. "By-the-bye, he is not going out of town, after all."

"No?" with studied indifference. "Then I suppose we may expect to hear that Mrs. Bethune will be in town shortly?"

"I really do think, Tita, that you ought to refrain from speeches like that. They are unworthy of you, and they are not true. Whatever infatuation Maurice felt for Marian Bethune in the past, lies in the past. Only to-day he told me——"

"Told you?"

Tita leans eagerly forward.

"That if he ever *had* loved her—and he seemed now to doubt that—he loved her no longer."

"Just shows how fickle he is," says Tita, with supreme scorn.

"Of course, if you are determined to misjudge him in *every* way——"

"It is he who misjudges me!" She gets up and walks impatiently from Margaret to the window and

back again. "How could he say I deliberately deserted him?"

Margaret looks at her. It suddenly occurs to her what a blessed thought that was of hers to take him out of hearing to the far end of the room.

"You heard that, then?"

Tita starts and turns crimson.

"Oh, that!" stammers she. "Well, I—I couldn't help it. I was near the door, and he spoke very loudly, and——"

"And you heard," says Margaret, suppressing some amusement. "Quite so. Well, you did leave him, you see."

"Not until he drove me to it by his cruelty, his wicked suspicions. You know that, Margaret."

"Oh! I know he behaved like a stupid boy," says Margaret impatiently.

"Ah, *darling* Meg! I *knew* you would take my part."

"And you," mercilessly, "behaved like a silly baby."

Tita flings herself into a chair with a petulant gesture.

"He has won you over to his side. I knew, when he took you down to the end of the room, where I could hear nothing, that he was going to poison your mind against me."

Miss Knollys gives way once more to ill-timed mirth.

"So you were *looking*, too?" says she.

"I—no. Oh *no*. I—I only"—growing crimson—"wanted to see whether you were safe. You had stopped talking, and I know how violent he can be, and," with a gasp, "I just looked once to see that you were alive."

"Tita," says Miss Knollys solemnly, "when I want those dozen lies told for me in a minute, I shan't ask *you* to tell them."

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW MAURICE SMOKES A CIGAR, AND MUSES ON MANY THINGS; HOW HE LAMENTS HIS SOLITUDE; AND HOW AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR COMES TO HIM.

"It is the mynd that maketh good or ill," says the old poet. Sir Maurice, sitting here in the library at The Place, feels *his* "mynd" far from happy. He has finished his business with the agent, and now there lies before him a long, dull evening in which to think on many things.

He is comfortable enough. His mother is well away, somewhere in Essex, and so he has the house to himself. The fire is burning very nicely—these May evenings are often chilly—and the cigar he is smoking is excellent. The dinner has been excellent, too. Astonishing, considering the shortness of the notice and what servants are. And yet—yet he feels dull to the last degree.

Over and over again his mind runs back to his morning's interview with Margaret. He would have stifled such returns, but they are beyond him. His brain insists on making photographs of Margaret's drawing-room, with its screens here and its pots there, and the tall jar filled with the sweet-scented flowers of early summer. The photographs go farther than that, too. One prominent object in all of them are the folding-doors at the end of the room.

It seems to him, as he angrily flicks the ash off the end of his cigar, that he had seen nothing but those folding-doors. His eyes had been riveted upon them. He—it was absurd, of course—but he had in a way seen through them—seen *her*—that little faithless, stormy child, who is playing the very mischief with his life.

"Ask not her name;

The light winds whisper it on every hand."

That is the worst of it! Rylton gets up, and begins to pace the room. Her name—her face— He cannot get rid of them. They seem to haunt him! And what has he *done* that she should so deride and scorn him? Say he was in fault about Marian Bethune. Well, he *was*—grossly in fault, if you like, so far as his having kept silence about his love for her before his marriage. But afterwards! He had little or nothing to reproach himself with afterwards. His married life had been blameless so far as Marian had been concerned. He had often wondered, indeed, about that—about that strange coldness he had felt when she had come to stay with them—with Tita and him. He had looked forward to her coming, and when she came—it was a sort of blank! At the time he hated himself for it, but it was not to be overcome. However, it was Marian's own doing. That last time when she had refused him, he had understood her. Love with her took a second place. Money held the reins.

Up and down, up and down the room he goes, smoking and thinking.

"She
Whom the gods love—tranquillity—"

is far from him to-night. Why had Tita run away when he went in? Margaret had told him plainly that she would not see him; she had almost allowed that she hated him, and certainly her whole conduct points that way. What is to be the end of it, then? Is he to be bound to her, and she to him, until kindly Death drops in to release them one from the other? And never a word between them all the time! It sounds ghastly! He flings his cigar into the fire, and, seating himself on the edge of the table, gives himself up a prey to evil prognostications.

His thoughts wander, but always they come back to those folding-doors, and the possible vision behind them.

Such a tender vision! Half child, half woman, wholly sweet, yet a little tyrant in her own way. The vision behind the folding-doors grows brighter. A little thing, slender, beautiful, with such bright, earnest eyes, and her lips just smiling and apart, and the soft rings of hair lying on the white forehead. Behind those doors—were the eyes glad, or angry, as they so often were—with him? With Margaret, no doubt, they were always bright. She loved Margaret, but him she never loved. Why should she? Had *he* loved her?

It is a terrible question, and all in a moment the answer to it comes to him—an answer almost as terrible. He had thought of it, trifled with it, played with it, this question. But now he *knows!* Yes, he does love her. Her, and her only.

He is still sitting at the table thinking. His head is bent a little down, his hands are resting on the table behind him. Will she ever forgive or forget?

"My love is like the sea,
As changeful and as free;
Sometimes she's angry, sometimes rough,
Yet oft she's smooth and calm enough—
Ay, much too calm for me!"

The pretty words come to him as if describing her; "sometimes she's angry": with him she had been often angry, but now, looking back on it, what sweetest anger it had been, anger that cried aloud for tender arms in which to sink and lose itself for ever. Oh, if only—only—she would be angry with him once again, he might so argue with her that she would forgive him, and, perhaps, take him, worthless as he is, to that warm heart of hers.

Mechanically he slips from the table to a standing position. He will be in town to-morrow. He will make one last effort to see her. Margaret will aid him, and, after all, what is there to separate them? Hescott is in South Africa (there was nothing in that really—he had made an ass of himself over that, more or less). And Marian Bethune? Well, Tita must know by this time that that old folly is at an end for ever—even Marian herself has tired of it.

He turns slowly; the door has opened behind him. The lamp is a little low, and he has to look closely into the gloom at the end of the room to see who has come in. One of the servants, no doubt. He looks again.

"The post, Peter?" says he expectantly. But it is not Peter who comes forward.

"*Maurice!*" says Marian Bethune, in a tone that is barely above a whisper.

She is with him now, her hands upon his arms, her eyes riveted upon his.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW RYLTON'S EVIL GENIUS COMES TO HIM AND SPEAKS SWEET TREACHERIES WITHIN HIS EAR; AND HOW HE RENOUNCES HER AND ALL HER DEEDS.

"You!" says Rylton. His voice is as low as her own, and strange—it sounds strange even to himself. Her hands are lying on his arms—the little hands he used to call snowflakes long ago. Great heaven! *how* long ago!

He does not repulse her—that is beyond him—but in this new strange voice of his there is assuredly no welcome. He feels choking. The dead past is so horribly dead that he cannot bear to look upon it. He feels cold—benumbed. What is he to say to her, or she to him? Must this battle be fought? And through all this weary wondering there is ever present with him a strong fear.

If Tita should hear of this—if she should learn that Marian was here to-night—with him—alone! His heart sinks within him. Not all the waters of Jordan could wash him clean in her eyes.

A sudden anger against this woman rises within him. Has she not been his undoing from first to last? Gently, but with determination, he lifts her fingers from his arms.

"Is this wise?" says he.

"No one can know. *No* one," says she hurriedly. "I have arranged it all. I am staying with the Heriots, and when I heard at dinner that you would be here to-night, I felt that I *should—must* see you."

She flings back the soft furred cloak that is enfolding her with a little rapid movement, as though stifling. It falls in a loose mass at her feet, and leaves her standing before him a very picture of beauty perfected. Beauty ripe, yet fresh!

All in black! From head to foot black clothes her. In her hair jet stars are shining, round her neck jet sparkles, making more fair the sweet fair flesh beneath; and her gown that clings around her shapely limbs as though it loves them, is black, too, and glittering with black beads.

She is looking her loveliest. Maurice takes a step towards her. Nature (as poor a thing at times as it is often grand) compels this step, then suddenly he stops. All at once, from the shadow of the room, the memory of a small, sweet, angry, frowning little face stands out.

"Still——" begins he.

"You need not be uneasy about me," says Marian, in the full egotism of her nature, still believing herself as dear to him as in those old days when he was at her feet. "I told them—the Heriot girl (who *would* follow me, and see to my bad headache)—that I should go for a long walk in the park to ease the pain; I told her not to expect me for some time. You know they let me do as I like. I ran through the park, and at the village inn I engaged a fly."

"But the people at the inn?"

"They could not see me. They did not know me; and, besides, I felt I could risk all to see you." She pauses. She lifts her beautiful face to his, and suddenly flings herself into his arms. "Oh, Maurice! you are free now—free! Oh! those *cursed* days when your mother watched and followed me. Now at last I can come to you, and you are free!"

"Free?"

"Yes, yes." She has raised herself again from his unwilling arms, and is gazing at him feverishly. So wild is her mood, so exalted in its own way, that she does not mark the coldness of his mien. "What is that little fool to you? Nothing! A mere shadow in your path!"

"She is my wife," says Rylton steadily.

"And *such* a wife!" Marian laughs nervously, strangely. "Besides," eagerly, "that might be arranged." She leans towards him. There is something terrible to Rylton in the expression of her eyes, the certainty that lies in them, that he is as eager to rid his life of Tita as she is. "There are acts, words of hers that could be used. On less"—again she goes close to him and presses the fingers of one hand against his breast—"on far less evidence than we could produce *many* a divorce has been procured."

Rylton's eyes are fixed upon her. A sense of revulsion is sickening him. How *her* eyes are shining! So might a fiend look; and her fingers—they seem to burn through his breast into his very soul.

"Acts—words—whose acts?" asks he slowly.

"Tita's."

"Lady Rylton's? What do you mean?"

He shakes himself suddenly free of the touch that has grown hateful to him.

"I mean," says she boldly, still unconscious of his real meaning of the abyss that lies before her, "that you can at any moment get rid of her. You can at any moment get a divorce!"

"By lying?" says he, with agitation. "By"—vehemently—"dragging her name into the dust. By falsely, grossly swearing against her."

"Why take it so much to heart?" says she, again coming close to him. "She would not care, she would *help* you. She could then marry her cousin. We could all see how that was. Would it be such false swearing after all?"

"Don't!" says Rylton, in a suffocating tone.

"Ah, Maurice, I understand you. I know how your honour revolts from such a step, but it is only a step—one—*one*, and then—*we*—" She covers her eyes with her hands and leans heavily against the table behind her. "We should be together—for ever," whispers she faintly.

A long, long silence follows this. It seems to hold, to envelop the room. It is like darkness! All at once Marian begins to tremble. She lifts her head.

"You do not speak," says she. There is something frantic in her low voice—an awful fear. The first dawn of the truth is breaking on her, but as yet the light is imperfect. "You do not speak," she repeats, and now her voice is higher, shriller; there is agony in it. "You mean—you mean— *What* do you mean, Maurice?"

"What can I mean? You called me just now an honourable man."

"Ah, your honour!" says she bitterly.

"You, at least, can find no flaw in it," says he suddenly.

"No? Was it an honourable man who married that girl for her money, loving me all the time? You," passionately, "you *did* love me then?"

There is question in her tone.

"The dishonour was to her, not to you," returns he, his eyes bent on the ground.

"Oh, forget her! What has she got to do with us?" cries she, with a sudden burst of angry misery, stung by the fact that he had given no answer to that last question of hers. "You loved me once. You loved me. Oh, Maurice," smiting her hands together, "you cannot have forgotten that! You cannot. Why should *I* remember if you forget? Each kiss of yours, each word, is graven on my soul! When I am dead, perhaps I shall forget, but not till then; and you—you, too—you must remember!"

"I remember!"

He is looking white and haggard.

"Ah!"

There is a quick triumphant note in her voice.

"But what?" he goes on quickly. "What have I to remember about you? That I prayed you on my knees day after day to give yourself to me. To risk the chances of poverty, to marry me—and," slowly, "I remember, too, your answer. It was always *No*! You loved me, you said, but you would wait. Poverty frightened you. I would have given my life for you, you would not give even your comfort for me. Even when my engagement with—with—"

"*Your wife.*"

The words come like a knife from between her clenched teeth.

"With Tita was almost accomplished—but not quite—I spoke to you again, but you still held back. You let me go—you deliberately gave me up to another. Was that love? I tell you," says he vehemently, "that

all the money the world contains would not have forced me from you at that time. You of your own accord put me outside your life. Was that love?"

"I was content to wait. I did not seek another in marriage. I, too, was poor. But I swore to myself to live and die a pauper—for your sake, if—if no help came to us." She pauses. A sigh—a cruel sigh bursts from her lips. "No help came."

She is deadly white. A sudden reaction from hope, sure and glorious, to horrible despair is mastering her. She had not thought, she had not known she loved him so well until now, when it has begun to dawn upon her that he no longer loves her.

In all her life no gladness had come to her until she met Rylton, and then her heart went forth, but without the full generosity of one who had been fed with love from its birth. Soured, narrowed by her surroundings, and chilled by a dread of the poverty she had so learned to fear, she had hung back when joy was offered to her, and now that joy was dead. It would be hers never, never! The love on which she had been counting all these days,

"For which I cry both day and night,
For which I let slip all delight,
Whereby I grow both deaf and blind,
Careless to win, unskilled to find,"

is hers no longer. Deaf and blind she has been indeed.

A little faintness falls on her; she sways, and Rylton, catching her, presses her into a chair. His touch recalls her to life, and rouses within her a sudden outbreak of passion.

"Maurice!"—she holds him with both her hands—"I will *not* believe it. It is not true! You love me still! You do, you do. I was"—she lets his arms go and raises her hands to his shoulders, and, leaning back, gazes with wild, beautiful, beseeching eyes into his face—"wrong—foolish—*mad*, I think, when I flung from me the only good that Heaven ever gave me, but—but for all that you love me still." She pauses. His eyes are on the ground; he looks like a criminal condemned to death. "Say it, *say it*," whispers she hoarsely. There is a silence that speaks. He can feel the shudder that runs through her. It nerves him.

"All this," he says—his voice is low and harsh, because of the agony of the moment—"all this comes —"

He grows silent. He cannot say it. *She* can.

"*Too late?*"

The words fall like a knell, yet there is a question in them, and one that must be answered.

"Too late!" repeats he. He could have cursed himself, yet it had to be done. He frees himself from her and stands back. "Why do you compel me to say such things?" cries he violently.

But she does not hear him. She is looking into the distant corner of the room as though—as one might suppose, seeing her earnest gaze—she can there see something. Her dead life's hope, perhaps, lying in its shroud. And perhaps, too, the sight is too much for her, for after a moment or two she raises her hands to her eyes, and clasps them there.

A sound breaks from her. In all his after life Rylton never forgets it.

"Oh!" says she, and that is all—but it sounds like a last breath—a final moan—an end.

Then all at once it is over. Whatever she has felt is done with for the present. She takes down her hands, and looks round at him deliberately. Her face is as the face of one dead, but her voice is clear and cold and cutting as an east wind.

"It is this, then," says she, "that all is at an end between us. You have tired of me. I have heard that men do tire. Now I know it. You wish me dead, perhaps."

"No! Marian, No!"

"For that, I suppose, I should thank you. Thank the man who once wanted so much to make me his wife. You *did* wish to make me—your wife?"

"Yes—yes. But that is all over," says he desperately.

"For you, yes! For me——"

She pauses.

"Great heavens!" cries Rylton. "Why go on like this? Why go into it again? Was it my fault? At that time I was a poor man. I laid my heart at your feet, but"—drawing a long breath—"I *was* a poor man. It all lay in that."

"Ah! You will throw that in my teeth always," says she—not violently now, not even with a touch of excitement, but slowly, evenly. "Even in the days to come. Yet it was not that that killed your love for me. There was something else. Go on. Let me hear it."

"There is nothing to hear. I beg of you, Marian, to——"

"To let you off?" says she, with a ghastly attempt at gaiety. "No, don't hope for that. There is something—something that has cost *me*—everything. And I will learn it. No one's love dies without a cause. And there is a cause for the death of yours. Be frank with me, now, in this our last hour. Make me a confession."

Five minutes ago she would have thrown her arms round him, and besought him, with tender phrases, to tell her what is on his mind. Now she stands apart from him, with a cold, lifeless smile upon her still colder lips.

"No! Do not perjure yourself," says she quickly, seeing him about to speak. "Do you think I do not know? That I cannot see by your face that there is something? I have studied it quite long enough to understand it. Come, Maurice. The past is the past—*you* have decided that—and it is a merely curious mood that leads me to ask you the secret of the great crime that has separated us. *My* crime, *bien entendu!*"

Rylton turns away from her with an impatient gesture, and goes back to the hearthrug. To persist like this! It is madness!

"There was no crime," says he. "But"—frowning—"as we are on the subject, and as you compel me to it, I——"

"No, don't speak. *Don't!*" says she quickly.

She seems to cower away from him. She had solicited his condemnation, yet when it came to the point she had no strength to bear it. And after all, is she had only known, he was merely going to accuse himself of having been over-foolish when he induced Tita to ask her to Oakdean on a visit.

"As you will," says he listlessly. "I was merely thinking of——"

"I know—I know. Of course *she* would make me out the worst in the world, and I have reason to know that her cousin, Miss Hescott, told you stories about me. There was a night when——"

"When——"

"Ah, I was wrong there. I was merely thinking of——"

"Wrong!" says Rylton slowly.

His thoughts have gone back to that last interview with Margaret, and what she had said about his folly in asking Marian on a visit to Oakdean, considering all that had been said and done between them in the old time.

"You remember it, then?" asks Marian. She looks at him. Her face is still livid, and as she speaks she throws back her head and laughs aloud—such a cruel, hateful laugh! "Well, I know it—I lied. I lied then most abominably."

"Then?"

"That night on the balcony—I confess it. I know Minnie Hescott told you."

Rylton's mind goes quickly back.

"That night," says he slowly, as if thinking, as if concentrating his thoughts, "the night you led me to where——"

He hesitates.

"Does it hurt you to name her in my presence?" asks Mrs. Bethune in a tone like velvet. "Well, spare yourself. Let us call her 'she'—the immaculate 'she.' Now you can go on with safety."

Her tone, her sneer, so evidently directed at Tita, maddens Rylton.

"You *say* you lied that night," says he, with barely suppressed fury. "And—I believe you. I was on the balcony with you, and you told me then that you did not know where my wife was. At all events, you gave me the *impression* that you did not know where she was. You made me a bet—you can't have forgotten it—that she was with her cousin in the garden. I took the bet, and then you led me to the arbour—the arbour where you *knew* she was. All things seemed to swear against her—all things save her cousin, Minnie Hescott."

"Minnie Hescott!" Marian Bethune laughs aloud. "Minnie and Tom Hescott! Would a brother swear against a brother? Would a sister give a brother away? No. And I will tell you why. Because it is to the interest of each to support the other. Minnie Hescott would lie far deeper than I did to save her brother's reputation, for with her brother's reputation her own would sink. *I* lied when I said I did not know where your precious wife was at that moment, but I lied for *your* sake, Maurice—to save you from a woman who was betraying you, and who would drag you down to the very dust with her."

Rylton lifts his head.

"To what woman are you alluding?" asks he shortly, icily.

"To Tita," returns she boldly. "I knew where she was that night; I knew she would be with her cousin at that moment—the cousin she had known and loved all her life. The cousin she had cast aside, *for the moment*, to take your title, and mount by it to a higher rank in life." She takes a step towards him, her large eyes blazing. "*Now* you know the truth," says she, with a vehemence that shakes her. "Your love may be dead to me, but you shall know *her* as she is! Faithless! False as hell she is! *She* shall not supplant me!"

She stands back from him, her hands outstretched and clenched. She looks almost superb in her wicked wrath.

Rylton regards her steadily.

"You are tired," says he coldly. "You ought to get some rest. You will sleep here to-night?"

There is a question in his tone.

"Why not? In this my old home—my home for years—your mother's home."

"My mother is in Scotland," says he briefly.

Something is tearing at his breast. Her deliberate, her most cruel attack on Tita has touched him to the quick.

"Don't be frightened!" says Mrs. Bethune, bursting out laughing. "What are you thinking of—your reputation?"

"No!"

Manlike, he refrains from the obvious return. But she, in her mad frenzy of despair and anger, supplies it.

"Mine, then? It is not worth a thought, eh? Who cares for me? Whether I sink with the vile, or swim with the good? No! I'll tell you what you are thinking of, Maurice." She lays her hand upon her throat quickly, as if stifling, yet laughs gaily. "You are thinking that that little *idiot* may hear of my being here, and that she will make a fuss about it—all underbred people love a fuss—and that——"

She would have gone on, but Rylton has given up his neutral position on the hearthrug—he has made one step forward, his face dark with passion.

"Not another word!" says he in a sharp, imperious tone. "Not another word about—MY WIFE!"

The last two words explain all. Mrs. Bethune stand still, as if struck to the heart.

For a full minute she so stands, and then—"You are right. I should not be here," says she. She turns, and rests her eyes steadily on him. "So *that* is my fault," says she, "that you love—*her!*"

Shame holds him silent.

"You *do* love her?" persists she, playing with her misery, insisting on it. She lays her hand upon her heart as if to stay its beating. Is it going to burst its bonds? Oh, if it only might, and at this moment! To

think that she—that *girl*—should take her place! And yet, had she not known? All through, had she not known? She had felt a superstitious fear about her, and now—"You do not speak?" says she. "Is it that you cannot? God knows I do not wonder! Well," slowly, "good-night! good-bye!"

She goes to the door.

"You cannot go like this," says Rylton, with some agitation. "Stay here to-night. I shall have time to catch the up-train, and I have business in town; and besides——"

"Do not lie!" says she. She stops and faces him; her eyes are aflame, and she throws out her right arm with a gesture that must be called magnificent. It fills him with a sort of admiration. "I want no hollow courtesies from you." She stoops, and gathering up her wraps, folds them around her. Then she turns to him again. "As all is dead between us." She stops short. "Oh no!"—laying her hand upon her heart.—"As all is dead in *you*——"

Whether her strength forsakes her here, or whether she refuses to say more, he never knows. She opens the door and goes into the hall, and, seeing a servant, beckons to him.

Rylton follows her, but, seeing him coming, she turns and waves him back. One last word she flings at him.

"Remember your reputation."

He can hear the bitterness of her laugh as she runs down the stone steps into the fly outside. She had evidently told the man to wait.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW TITA PLEADS HER CAUSE WITH MARGARET; AND HOW MARGARET REBUKES HER; AND HOW STEPS ARE HEARD, AND TITA SEEKS SECLUSION BEHIND A JAPANESE SCREEN; AND WHAT COMES OF IT.

"What hour did he say he was coming?" asks Tita, looking up suddenly from the book she has been pretending to read.

"About four. I wish, dearest, you would consent to see him."

"I consent? Four, you say? And it is just three now. A whole hour before I feel his hated presence in the house. Where are you going to receive him?"

"In the small drawing-room, I suppose."

"You *suppose*. Margaret, is it possible you have not given directions to James? Why, he might show him in *here*."

"Well, even if he did," says Margaret impatiently, "I don't suppose he would do you any bodily harm. Once you saw him the ice would be broken, and——"

"We should both fall in and be drowned. It would only make matters worse, I assure you."

"It would be a change at all events, and 'variety is charming.' As it is, you have both fallen out."

"You are getting too funny for anything," says Tita, tilting her chin saucily.

"Now, if you were to do as you suggest, fall in—in *love*—with each other——"

"Really, Margaret, this is beneath you," says Tita, laughing in spite of herself. "No! no! no! I tell you," starting to her feet, "I'd rather *die* than meet him again. When you and Colonel Neilson are married ——"

"Oh! as to *that*," says Margaret, but she colours faintly.

"I shall take a tiny cottage in the country, and a tiny maid; and I'll have chickens, and a big dog, and a pony and trap, and——"

"A desolate hearth. No, Tita, you were not born for the old maid's joys."

"Well, I was not born to be tyrannized over, any way," says Tita, raising her arms above her head, her fingers interlaced, and yawning lightly. "And old maid has liberty, at all events."

"I don't see that mine does me much good," says Margaret ruefully.

"That's why you are going to give it up. Though anyone who could call *you* an old maid would be a fool. I sometimes"—wistfully—"wish you *were* going to be one, Meg, because then I could live with you for ever."

"Well, you shall."

"No; not I. Three is trumpery."

"There won't be three."

"I wish I had a big bet on that. I wish someone would bet me my old dear home, my Oakdean, upon that. I should be a happy girl again."

A great sadness grows within her eyes.

"Tita, you could be happy if you chose."

"You are always saying that," says Lady Rylton, looking full at her.
"But how—*how* can I be happy!"

"*See* Maurice! Make it up with him. Put an end to this foolish quarrel."

"What should I gain by agreeing to live again with a man who cares nothing for me? I tell you, Margaret, that I desire no great things. I did not expect to wring from life extraordinary joys. I have never been exorbitant in my demands. I did not even ask that Maurice should *love* me. I asked only that he should *like* me—be—be *fond* of me. I"—her voice beginning to tremble—"have had *so* few people to be fond of me; and to *live* with anyone, Margaret, to see him all day long, and know he cared nothing for me, that he thought me in his way, that he so hated me that he couldn't speak to me without scolding me, or saying hurtful words! Oh, no! I could not do that again."

"Maurice has been most unfortunate," says Margaret, very sadly. "Do you really believe all this of him, Tita?"

"I believe he loved Mrs. Bethune all the time," returns she simply. "And even if it be true what you say, that he does not love her now—still he does not love me either."

"And you?"

"Oh, I—I am like the 'miller of the Dee.'" She had been on the verge of tears, but now she laughs.

"I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me."

I told you that before. Why do you persist in thinking I am in love? Such a silly phrase! At all events"—disdainfully—"I'm not in love with Maurice."

"I am afraid not, indeed," says Margaret, in a low voice. "And yet you seem to have such a capacity for loving. Me I *know* you love—and that old home."

"Ah yes—that! But that is gone. And soon you will be gone, too."

"Never! never!" says Margaret earnestly. "And all this is so morbid, Tita. You must rouse yourself; you know some of our old friends are coming to see me on Sunday next. You will meet them?"

"If you like." She pauses. "Is Mrs. Chichester coming?"

"Yes, I think so, and Randal Gower, and some others."

"I should like to see them very much."

She has grown quite animated.

"The only one you *don't* want to see, in my opinion, is your husband," says Margaret, with a little reproach.

"I want to see him quite as much as he wants to see me," says Tita. "By-the-bye, you ought to tell James about his coming. It is half-past three now."

"He's always late," says Margaret lazily.

But even as she says it, both Tita and she are conscious of the approach of a man's footstep, that assuredly is not the footstep of James.

"I told you—I told you!" cries Tita, springing to her feet, and wringing her hands. "Oh! *why* didn't you give some directions to James? Oh, Margaret! Oh! *what* shall I do? If I go out there I shall meet him face to face. Oh! why do people build rooms with only one door in them? I'm undone." She glances wildly round her, and in the far distance of this big drawing-room espies a screen. "That," gasps she, "*that* will do! I'll hide myself behind that. Don't keep him long, Meg darling! Hurry him off. Say you've got the cholera—*any* little thing like that—and get rid of him."

"Tita—you can't. It is impossible. He will probably say things, and you won't like them—and——"

"I shan't listen! I shall put my fingers in my ears. Of *course*"—indignantly—"I shan't listen."

"But—Tita—good gracious——"

Her other words are lost for ever. The handle of the door is turned. Tita, indeed, has barely time to scramble behind the screen when Sir Maurice is announced by James, who is electrified by the glance his mistress casts at him.

"I expect I'm a little early," says Rylton, shaking hands with Margaret—apologizing in his words but not in his tone. He is of course unaware of the heart-burnings in Margaret's breast, or the apology would have been more than a mere society speech. "You are alone?"

Here poor Margaret's purgatory begins—Margaret, who is the soul of truth.

"Well, you can see!" says she, spreading out her hands and giving a comprehensive glance round her—a glance that rests as if stricken on the screen. What awful possibilities lie behind that!

"Yes, yes, of course. Yet I fancied I heard voices."

"How curious are our fancies!" says poor Margaret, taking the tone of an advanced Theosophist, even while her heart is dying within her.

"Where is Tita?" asks Rylton suddenly. To Margaret's guilty conscience the direct question sounds like an open disbelief in her former answers. But Rylton had asked it thus abruptly merely because he felt that if he lingered over it it never might be asked; and he *must* know. "Where is Tita?" asks he again. Where indeed!

"She is here—at least," hurriedly, almost frantically, "*with me*, you know; staying with me. *Staying*, you know."

"Yes, I know. Gone out, perhaps?"

"No, n—o. In retirement," says Margaret wretchedly. *Is* she listening? How can she answer him all through? If he speaks *against* her, what is she to do? If she has in all justice to condemn her in some little ways, will she bear it? Will she keep her fingers in her ears?

"Ah—headache, I suppose," says Rylton.

"Yes; her head aches sometimes," says Margaret, who now feels she is fast developing into a confirmed liar.

"It usen't to ache," says he.

At this Miss Knollys grows a little wild.

"Used it not?" says she. "You remember, perhaps; I don't! But I am certain she would object to being made a subject for cross-examination. If you are anxious about her health, you need not be. She is well, very well indeed. Excellently well. She seems to regret—to require—nothing."

Margaret has quite assured herself that this little speech of hers will be acceptable to the hidden form behind the screen. She feels, indeed, quite proud of it. Tita had been angry with her that last day when she had told Rylton she looked pale, but now she casts a glance at the screen, and to her horror sees that it shakes perceptibly. There is something angry in the shake of it. What is wrong now? What has she said or done?

"I am glad to hear that," says Sir Maurice, in a tone that is absolutely raging. He moves up the room, as he speaks, to the fire—a small fire, it is still a little chilly—and terribly close to the screen. Indeed, as

he stoops to lift the poker and break the coals, his elbow touches the corner of it.

"Don't stand there; come over here. So bad for your complexion!" says Margaret frantically.

As Maurice is about as brown as he can be, this caution falls somewhat flat.

"It's cold enough," says he absently, standing upright, with his hands behind him. He gives himself a little shake, as men do when airing themselves before a fire in mid-winter. It is quite warm to-day, but he had "seen the fire," and—we are all children of habit. "It is wonderfully cold for this time of year," continues he, even more absently than before. He lays his hand upon the corner of the screen near him. Margaret is conscious of a vague sensation of faintness. Maurice turns to her.

"You were saying that Tita——"

Here Margaret rebels.

"Once for all, Maurice, I decline to discuss your wife," says she quickly. "Talk of anything else on earth you like—of Mr. Gladstone, the Irish question, poor Lord Tennyson, the mice in Hungary, *anything*—but *not* of Tita!"

"But why?" asks Rylton. "Has she forbidden you to mention her to me?"

"Certainly not! Why should she?"

"Why indeed? A man more barbarously treated by her than I have been—has seldom——"

Margaret's unhappy eyes once more glance towards the screen. It is shaking now—ominously.

"Of course! Of course! We all know that," says she, her eyes on the screen, her mind nowhere. She has not the least idea of the words she has chosen. She had meant only to pacify him, to avert the catastrophe if possible: she had spoken timidly, enthusiastically, *fatally*. The screen now seems to quiver to its fall. An earthquake has taken possession of it, apparently—an earthquake in an extremely advanced stage.

Oh, those girls, and their promises about their fingers and their ears!

"I'm sorry I can't ask you to stay, Maurice," says she hurriedly. "But—but I'm not well: I, too, have a headache—a sort of neuralgia, you know."

"You seem pretty well, however," says Sir Maurice, regarding her curiously.

"Oh, I dare say," impatiently. "But I'm not. I'm ill. I tell you this sudden attack of influenza is overpowering me, and—it's *infectious*, my dear Maurice. It is really. They all say so—the very cleverest doctors; and I should never forgive myself if you took it—and, besides——"

"You can't be feeling very bad," says Maurice slowly. "Your colour is all right."

"Ah! That is what is so deceptive about it," says Margaret eagerly. "One looks well, even whilst one is almost dying. I assure you these sudden attacks of—of toothache"—wildly—"are most trying. They take so much out of one."

"They must," says Maurice gravely. "So many attacks, and all endured at the same time, would shake the constitution of an annuitant. Headache, neuralgia, influenza, toothache! You have been greatly afflicted. Are you sure you feel no symptoms of hydrophobia?"

"Maurice——"

"No? So glad of that! My dear girl, why are you so anxious to get rid of me?"

"Anxious to get rid of you? What an absurd idea!"

"Well, if not that, what on earth *do* you mean?"

"I have told you! I have a headache."

"Like Lady Rylton. The fact is, Margaret," says he, turning upon her wrathfully, "she has bound you down not to listen to a word I can say in my own defence. The last day I was here you were very different. But I can see she has been at work since, and is fast prejudicing you against me. I call that most unfair. I don't blame *you*, though I think you *might* give half an hour to a cousin and an old friend—one who was your friend long before ever *she* saw you. You think the right is all on her side; but is it? Now I put it fairly to you. *Is it?*"

Margaret is quaking.

"My dear Maurice—I—you know how I feel for you—for"—with a frantic glance at the screen—"for *both* of you, but——"

"Pshaw! that is mere playing with the subject. Do you mean to say you have given up even your honest opinion to her? You must know that it is not right for a wife to refuse to live with her husband. Come"—vehemently—"you *must* know that."

"Yes. Yes, of course," says poor Margaret, who doesn't know on earth what she is saying.

Her eyes are riveted on that awful screen, and now she is shaken to the very core by the fact that it *is* evidently undergoing a second earthquake! What is to be done? How long will this last? And when the end comes, will even *one* of them be left alive to tell the tale?

"Look here!" says Rylton. "She won't see me, it appears; she declines to acknowledge the tie that binds us. She has plainly decided on putting me outside her life altogether. But she can't do that, you know. And"—with some vehemence—"what I wish to say is this, that if I was in fault when I married her, fancying myself in love with another woman——"

"Maurice, I entreat," says Margaret, rising, "I *desire* you to——"

"No; you must listen. I will not be condemned unheard. She can't have it all her own way. If I was in fault, so was she. Is it right for a woman to marry a man without one spark of love for him, with—she never concealed it—an almost open dislike to him?"

"Dislike? Maurice——"

"Well, is she not proving it now? My coming seems to be the signal for her hiding herself away in her own room. 'In retirement' you said she was, with a bad headache. Do you think"—furiously—"I can't see through her headaches? Now listen, Margaret; the case stands thus: I married her for her money, and she married me for my title. We both accepted the risk, and——"

Margaret throws up her hands. Her face grows livid, her eyes are fastened on the screen, and at this moment it goes over with a loud crash.

"It is not true! It is a lie!" says Tita, advancing into the middle of the room, her lips apart, her eyes blazing.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW TITA WAGES WAR WITH MARGARET AND MAURICE; AND HOW MARGARET SUFFERS IGNOMINIOUS TREATMENT ON BOTH HANDS; AND HOW MAURICE AT THE LAST GAINS ONE SMALL VICTORY.

There is a moment's awful silence, and then Tita sweeps straight up to Rylton, who is gazing at her as if he never saw her before. As for Margaret, she feels as if she is going to faint.

"I—I!" says Tita; "to accuse me of marrying you for your title! I never thought about your title. I don't care a fig for your title. My greatest grief now is that people call me Lady Rylton."

"I beg of you, Tita——" begins Margaret, trembling; she lays her hand on the girl's arm, but Tita shakes her off.

"Don't speak to me. Don't touch me. You are as bad as he is. You took his part all through. You said you *felt* for him! When he was saying all sorts of dreadful things about me. You said, 'Yes, yes, of course.' I heard you; I was listening. I heard every word."

"May I ask," says Rylton, "if you did not marry me for my title, what *did* you marry me for? Not," with a sneer, "for love, certainly."

"I should think not," with a sneer on her part that sinks his into insignificance. "I married you to escape from my uncle, who was making me wretched! But not"—with an ireful glance at him—"half as wretched as *you* have made me!"

Rylton shrugs his shoulders. You should never shrug your shoulders when a woman is angry.

"Yes, wretched—wretched!" says Tita, angry tears flooding her eyes. "There was never *any* one so

miserable as I have been since I married you."

"That makes it all the more unfortunate that you are married to me still," says Rylton icily.

"I may be married to you—I shan't live with you," says Tita.

"We shall see to that," says Rylton, who has lost his head a little.

"Yes, *I* shall," returns she, with open defiance.

Meantime Margaret, who had been crushed by that first onslaught on her, has recovered herself a little. To appeal to Tita again is useless; but to Maurice—she *must* say a word of entreaty to Maurice. Tita has been most unjust, but men are of nobler make. Maurice will understand.

"I think," says she very gently, catching his eye, "that it would be better for you to—to discuss all this—with Tita—alone. I shall go, but I beg of you, Maurice, to——"

"Pray don't beg anything of me," says Maurice, turning upon her with an expression that bodes no good to anyone. "I should think you ought to be the last person in the world to ask a favour of me."

"Good gracious! what have I done now?" exclaims Margaret shrinking back, and cut to the heart by this fresh affront.

"You knew she was there, behind that screen, and you never gave me even a hint about it. A hint would have been sufficient, but——"

"I did!" says Margaret, driven to bay. "I told you I had a headache, and that you were to go away—but you wouldn't!"

"You told me you had twenty diseases, but even that wouldn't exonerate you from letting her hear what was not meant for her ears."

"Ah! I'm glad you acknowledge even *so* much," breaks in Tita vindictively.

"Even though they weren't meant for your ears I'm glad you heard them," says Rylton, turning to her with all the air of one who isn't going to give in at *any* price. "But as for you, Margaret, I did not expect this from you. I believed you stanch, at all events, and honest; yet you deliberately let me say what was in my mind, *knowing* there was an unseen listener who would be sure to make the worst of all she heard."

"Tita, *you* shall explain this!" says Margaret, turning with a tragic gesture towards her. "Speak. Tell him."

"What is the good of telling him anything?" says Tita, regarding her coldly. "Yet though you have forsaken me, Margaret, I will do as you wish." She turns to Rylton. "It was against Margaret's wish that I hid behind that screen. I heard you coming, and there was no way out of the room except by the door through which you would enter, and rather than meet you I felt"—with a sudden flash of her large eyes at him—"I would willingly die. So I got behind that screen, and—and" She pauses. "Well, that's all," says she.

"You see it was not my fault," says Margaret.

She lets a passing glance fall on Rylton, and with an increase of dignity in her air leaves the room. The two left behind look strangely at each other.

"So you were listening?" says Rylton. "Listening all that time?"

"You wrong me as usual. I was *not* listening all the time. I didn't want to listen at all. Do you think I ever wanted to hear your voice again?"

"I didn't flatter myself so far, as to this,"—bitterly—"and yet——"

"I only wanted to get away from you, and I wasn't listening, really. I kept my fingers *tight* in my ears until you had been there for *hours*; then my arms felt as if they were dead, and I—well, I dropped them then."

"Hours! I like that! Why, I haven't been here for half an hour yet."

"Oh, *you* could say anything!" says Tita contemptuously.

She walks away from him, and flings herself into a lounging chair. She is dressed in a very pale pink

gown, with knots of black velvet here and there. And as she has seated herself a tiny, exquisitely shaped foot, clad in a pale pink stocking and black shoe, betrays itself to the admiring air.

Rylton, who is too angry to see anything, and has only a half-conscious knowledge that she is looking more beautiful than ever, goes up to the lounging chair in which she is reclining, and looking down upon her, says sternly, and with a distinctly dramatic air:

"At last we meet."

"At last," returns she, regarding with fixed interest the tip of her shoe as she sways it with an air of steady indifference to and fro. "Against my will!"

"I know that. I have had plenty of time to know that."

"Then why do you come?"

"To see you," says he plainly.

"Knowing that I didn't wish to see *you*?"

"Yes. Because I wish to see you."

"What a man's reason!" says she, with a scoffing smile. "I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I *am* sometimes," says Rylton, making an effort to suppress the anger that is rising within him. "I sometimes tell myself, for example, that I must be the meanest hound alive. I know you avoid me—hate me—and yet I come."

"But why—why?" impatiently.

"Because," slowly, "I—do not hate *you*."

"Don't be a hypocrite," says Tita sharply. She gets up suddenly, pushing back her chair behind her. "*Why* do you pretend?" says she. "What is to be gained by it? I know we are bound to each other in a sense—bound——" She breaks off. "Ah, that horrid word!" cries she. "Why can we not get rid of it? Why can't we separate? How ridiculous the laws are! You would be as glad to say good-bye to me for ever as I should be to say it to you, and yet—"

"I beg your pardon," says Rylton, interrupting her quickly. "Speak for yourself only. For my part, I have no desire to be separated from you now, or," steadily, "at any other time."

Tita lifts her eyes and looks at him. Their glances meet, and there is something in his that brings the blood to her face.

"I cannot understand you," cries she, with some agitation. "You don't want my money *now*; you have plenty of your own, and," throwing up her head with a disdainful little gesture, "certainly you don't want *me*."

"You seem wonderfully certain on many points," says Rylton, "but is your judgment always infallible?"

"In this case, yes."

"Ah! you have decided," says he. His gaze wanders from her face and falls upon her hands. On the right hand is a beautiful pearl ring. He regards it without thought for a second or two, and then he wakens to the fact that he had never seen it there before. "Who gave you that ring?" demands he suddenly, with something of the old masterful air. It is so like the old air that Tita for a little while is silent, then she wakes. No! It is all over now—that ownership. She has emancipated herself; she is free. There is something strange and terrible, however, to her in the knowledge that this thought gives her no joy. She stands pale, actually frightened, for there *is* fear in the knowledge—that she had felt a sharp throb of delight when that commanding tone had fallen on her ears.

She recovers almost instantly.

"You think it was Tom, perhaps," says she, speaking with a little difficulty, but smiling contemptuously. "Well, it was not. It was only Margaret, after all. This is a last insult, I suppose. Was it to deliver it that you came here to-day?"

"No," he is beginning, "but—"

"*You* ask me questions," continues she, brushing his words aside with a wave of her small hand. "And I—I—have *I* no questions to ask?" She stops, as if suffocating.

"You have, God knows," says he. "And"—he hesitates—"I don't expect you to believe me, but—that old folly—it is dead."

"Dead?" She shakes her head. "What killed it?"

"*You!*" says Rylton.

One burning glance she casts at him.

"Do not let us waste time," says she. "Tell me plainly why you came here, why you want to see me."

"You give me little encouragement to speak"—bitterly. "But it is this: I want you to come back to me, to be mistress of my house again. I"—he pauses as if seeking words—"I have bought a new house; I want you to come and be the head of it."

Tita has been listening to him with wide eyes. She had grown pale as death itself during his speech, and now she recoils from him. She makes a little movement as though to repel him for ever, and then, suddenly she covers her eyes with her hands, and bursts into violent weeping.

"Oh no! No!" gasps she. "Never! Never again! How *could* you ask me!"

He takes a step towards her, and lays his hand upon her arm.

"No, don't touch me. Don't speak to me," cries she. "I have *had* to see you to-day, and it has been terrible to me—so terrible that I hope I shall *never* see you again. I could not bear it. Go—go away!"

"Do not send me from you like this," entreats Rylton, in a voice that trembles. Her tears cut him to the heart. He is so close to her that he has only to put out his hand to catch her—to take her to him, and yet—"Think, Tita! We have got to live out our lives, whether we like it or not. *Can* we not live them out together?"

"We cannot," says Tita, in a low but distinct voice. She turns to him proudly. "Have you forgotten?" says she. Her poor little face is stained with tears, but he sees no disfigurement in it; he has but one desire, and that is to take her into his arms and kiss those tears away from it for ever.

"Forget! Do you think I shall ever forget? It is my curse that I shall always remember. But that is at an end, Tita. I *swear* it! I hope I shall never see her again. If you wish it—I—"

"I wish nothing with regard to either her or you," interrupts Tita, her breath coming a little quickly. "It is nothing to me. I do not care."

"Don't say that," says Rylton hoarsely. He is fighting his battle inch by inch. "Give me some hope! Is one sin to condemn a man for ever? I tell you all that is done. And you—if you love no one—give *me* a chance!"

"Why should I trouble myself so far?" says she, with infinite disdain.

At this Rylton turns away from her. He goes to the window, and stands there gazing out, but seeing nothing.

"You are implacable—cold, heartless," says he, in a low tone, fraught with hidden meaning.

"Oh, let us leave *hearts* out of the discussion," cries Tita scornfully. "And, indeed, why should we have any discussions? Why need we talk to each other at all? This interview"—clenching her handkerchief into a ball—"what has it done for us? It has only made us both wretched!" She takes a step nearer to him. "Do—do promise me you will not seek another."

"I cannot promise you that."

"No?" She turns back again. "Well—go away now, at all events," says she, sighing.

"Not until I have said what is on my mind," says Rylton, with determination.

"Well, say it"—frowning.

"I will! You are my wife, and I am your husband, and I think it is your *duty* to live with me."

She looks at him for a long time, as if thinking.

"I'll tell you what you think," says she slowly, "that it will add to your respectability in the eyes of your world to have your wife living in *your* house, and not in Margaret's."

"I don't expect to be generously judged by you," says he. "But even as you put it there is sense in it. If our world——"

"Yours! yours!" interrupts she angrily—that old wound had always rankled. "It is not my world! I have nothing to do with it. I do not belong to it. Your mother showed me that, even so long ago as when we were first"—there is a little perceptible hesitation—"married".

"*Hang* my mother!" says Rylton violently. "I tell you my world is your world, and if not—well, then I have no desire to belong to it. The question is, Tita, will you consent to forget—and—and forgive—and"—with a sudden plunge—"make it up with me?"

He would have taken her hand here, but she slips adroitly behind a small table.

"Say it is for respectability's sake, if you like, that I ask you to return to me," goes on Rylton, a little daunted, however, by her determined entrenchment; "though it is not. Still——"

She stops him.

"It is no use," says she. "Don't go on. I cannot. I *will* not. I," her lips quiver slightly—"I was *too* unhappy with you. And I should always think of——" Her voice dies away.

Rylton is thinking, too, of last night, and that terrible interview with Marian. A feeling of hatred towards her grows within him. She had played with him—killed all that was best in him, and then flung him aside. She had let him go for the moment—only to return and spoil whatever good the world had left him. Her face rises before him pleading, seductive; and here is the other face—angry, scornful. Oh, dear little angry face! How fair, how pure, and how beloved!

"I tell you," says he, breaking out vehemently, "that all that is at an end—if I ever loved her." He forgets everything now, and, catching her hands, holds them tightly in his own. "Give me another trial," entreats he.

"No, no!" She speaks as if choking, but for all that she draws her hands out of his. "It would be madness. You would tire. We should tire of each other in a week—where there is no love. No, no!"

"You refuse, then?"

"I refuse!"

"Tita——"

She turns upon him passionately.

"I *won't* listen. It is useless. You"—a sob breaks from her—"why *don't* you go!" she cries a little wildly.

"This is not good-bye," says he desperately. "You will let me come again? Margaret, I know, receives on Sundays. *Say* I may come then."

"Yes."

She gives the permission faintly, and with evident reluctance. She lifts her eyes, and makes a gesture towards the door.

"Oh, I am going," says Rylton bitterly. He goes a step or two away from her, and then pauses as if loath to leave her.

"You might at least shake hands with me," says he.

She hesitates—then lays a cold little hand in his. He too hesitates, then, stooping, presses his lips warmly, lingeringly to it.

In another moment he is gone.

Tita stands motionless, listening to his departing footsteps. For a while she struggles with herself, as if determined to overcome the strange emotion that is threatening to master her. Then she gives way, and, flinging herself into an armchair, breaks into a passion of tears.

Margaret, coming presently into the room, sees her, and going to her, kneels down beside the chair and takes her into her arms.

"Oh, Margaret!" cries Tita. "Oh, Meg! Meg! And I was so rude to you! But to see him—to see him again——"

"My poor darling!" says Margaret, pressing the girl to her with infinite tenderness.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW SOME OLD FRIENDS REAPPEAR AGAIN; AND HOW SOME NEWS IS TOLD; AND HOW MAURICE MAKES ANOTHER EFFORT TO WIN HIS CASE.

"Just been to see her," says Mr. Gower, who has selected the snuggest chair in Margaret's drawing-room, and is now holding forth from its cushioned depths with a radiant smile upon his brow. "She's staying with the Tennants. They always had a hankering after Mrs. Bethune."

"Fancy Marian's being with *anyone* when Tessie is in town!" says Margaret. "Captain Marryatt, that is a wretchedly uncomfortable chair. Come and sit here."

"Oh, thanks! I'm all right," says Marryatt, who would have died rather than give up his present seat. It has a full command of the door. It is plain, indeed, to all present that he is expecting someone, and that someone Mrs. Chichester—his mistaken, if honest, infatuation for that lean young woman being still as ardent as of yore.

Minnie Hescott, who is talking to Tita, conceals a smile behind her fan.

"What! haven't you heard about her and Marian?" asks Gower, leaning towards his hostess. "Why, you must be out of the swim altogether not to have heard that. There's a split there. A regular cucumber coldness! They don't speak now."

"An exaggeration, surely," says Margaret. "I saw lady Rylton yesterday and— How d'ye do, colonel Neilson?"

There is the faintest blush on Margaret's cheek as she rises to receive her warrior.

"I hardly expected you to-day; I thought you were going down to Twickenham."

"What an awful story!" says Gower, letting her hear his whisper under pretence of picking up her handkerchief.

"Monday will do for that," says Neilson. "But Monday might not do for you. I decided not to risk the Sunday. By-the-bye, I have something to say to you, presently, if you can spare me a moment."

"Certainly," says Margaret, whereon the Colonel moves away to talk to someone else.

"Same old game, I suppose," suggests Gower, in a sweetly confidential tone, when he has gone. "Find it a little slow, don't you, knowing exactly what he's going to say to you, presently, when you have spared him a moment?"

"I really *don't* know," says Margaret, bringing a dignified eye to bear upon him.

"No? Then you ought. It isn't that you haven't had opportunities enough. Time has not been denied you. But as you say you *don't* know, I think it my duty to prepare you; to——"

"Really, Randal, I don't wish to know anything. I dare say Colonel Neilson is quite capable of——"

"He appears to me," severely, "to be thoroughly *in*-capable. He ought to have impressed it upon your brain in half the time he's taken to do it. It is quite a *little* speech, and only firmness was required to make you remember it. This is it——"

"I don't wish to hear anything," says Margaret with suspicious haste.

"But *I* wish you to hear it. I think it bad to have things sprung upon one unawares. Now listen. 'For the nine hundred and ninetieth time, my beloved Margaret, I implore you on my bended knees to make me a happy man!' You remember it now?"

"No, indeed; I never heard such an absurd speech in my life."

"That's the *second* story you've told to-day," says Mr. Gower, regarding her with gentle sorrow.

"Oh, don't be stupid!" says Margaret. "Tell me what I *want* to know; about Marian. I am sorry if there really has occurred a breach between her and my aunt."

"There is little doubt about that! What a born orator is a woman!" says Mr. Gower, with deep enthusiasm. "Not *one* woman, mind you, but *every* woman. What command of language is theirs! I assure you if Mr. Goldstone had heard Mrs. Bethune on the subject of the Dowager Lady Rylton to-day, he would have given her a place in the Cabinet upon the spot. She would carry all before her in the House of Commons; we should have Home Rule for Ireland in twenty-four hours."

"Perhaps she wouldn't have voted for it," says Margaret, laughing.

"You bet!" says Mr. Gower. "Any way, there's a row on between her and Lady Rylton. The hatchet that has been buried for so long is dug up again, and it is now war to the knife between them."

"But what is to become of Marian?" asks Margaret anxiously, whose kind heart bleeds for all sad souls.

"She's going to marry a Russian. A nobody—but lots of money. Best thing she could do, too," says Gower, speaking the last words hurriedly, as he sees the door open and Margaret rise to receive her new visitor.

The fresh arrival is Mrs. Chichester, exquisitely arrayed in a summery costume of apple-green. It suits her eyes, which are greener than ever to-day, and sparkling. Her whole air, indeed, is full of delightful vivacity. There is a *verve*, a brightness, about her that communicates itself to her audience. She looks taller, thinner than usual.

"Such news!" cries she, in her clear, sharp voice. "Jack is coming home next month!"

"Jack?" questions Margaret.

"Yes, Jack. Jack Chichester—my husband, don't you know?"

At this a stricken silence falls upon her listeners. They all try to look as if they had been accustomed to think of Jack Chichester as an old and bosom friend. They also try (and this is even harder) *not* to look at Marryatt. As for him, he has forgotten that there is anyone to look at him. His foolish, boyish eyes are fixed on Mrs. Chichester.

"Yes, really," goes on that somewhat flighty young person. "No wonder you are all surprised. He has been so long away that I expect you thought he wasn't anywhere. *I* did almost. Well, he's coming now, any way, and that's a blessing. You'll all like him, I can tell you."

There is a ring of genuine feeling in her tone, not to be mistaken. She *is* glad at the thought of her husband's return. Marryatt, recognising that ring, sinks into a chair with a groan. Oh, heavens! How he has pranced after that woman for fully twelve months, dancing attendance upon her, fulfilling her commands, and all the time her heart was filled with the face of this abominable Jack!

Presently, on the first moment, indeed, when he can do so with any decency, he leaves Miss Knollys' house a sadder, and most decidedly a wiser, man!

"Am I to sympathize with you?" asks Gower, in a low, expressive voice, as Mrs. Chichester sweeps towards him.

She laughs.

"Pouf!" says she, making light of his little impertinence. "You're out of it altogether. Why, I'm *glad* he's coming home. You've mistaken me."

"I knew it. I felt it all along," cries Gower enthusiastically. "It is *you* who have mistaken me. When I mentioned the word 'sympathy'—ah!" rapturously, "that was sympathy with your joy!"

"Was it? You ought to do it again," says Mrs. Chichester; "and before the glass next time. *Practise* it. However, I'm too happy to give you the lesson you deserve. I can tell you Jack isn't half bad. I like him better, any way, than any man I ever met in my life, and that's saying a lot. Of course," candidly, "I doubt if I could ever like any man as well as myself; but I confess I run it very close with Jack."

"Naturally. 'We all love Jack,'" quotes Mr. Gower in a sort of ecstasy.

"But for all that, I must have my little fling sometimes," says Jack's wife, with a delightful smile, that makes her look thinner than ever.

"Quite so," says Gower.

They both laugh—a good healthy laugh; and, indeed, the vulgar expression coming from her does not sound so bad as it might. There are some people who, when they say a queer thing, set one's teeth on edge; and there are others who, when they use the same words, raise only a smile. As yet, there is much injustice in the world.

Margaret is standing in a distant window, talking in an undertone to Colonel Neilson, and Gower is now teasing Minnie Hescott, when once again the door is thrown open and Sir Maurice comes in.

"Another surprise packet!" says Gower faintly. "Miss Hescott, you know everything. Are there more to come? I'm not strong; my heart is in a bad state. Pray, *pray* give me a gentle word of warning if——"

"Isn't he looking well!" says Minnie excitedly.

Sir Maurice is indeed looking very handsome as he comes up the room. It brings a mutual smile to Margaret and Colonel Neilson's lips as they note the extreme care with which he has got himself up for the visit to—*his wife!*

He is holding his head very high, and the flower in his button-hole has evidently been chosen with great care. He shakes hands with Margaret first, of course, and with Tita last. She is sitting near Mrs. Chichester, and she gives him her hand without looking at him. She has grown a little white.

And then presently they all fade away: Captain Marryatt first, as has been said, and Mrs. Chichester last, still saying absurd things about the return of her "Jack"—absurd, but undoubtedly sincere. "That's what made them so funny," said Gower afterwards. And now Margaret makes a little excuse and goes too, but not before she has asked Maurice to stay to dinner.

"Oh, thank you!" says Rylton, and then hesitates; but after a glance at Tita's face, most reluctantly, and a little hopelessly, as it seems to Margaret, declares he has a previous engagement.

"Another night, then," says Margaret kindly, and closes the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW MAURICE GAINS ANOTHER POINT; AND HOW TITA CONSENTS TO THINK ABOUT IT; AND HOW MARGARET TELLS A LIE.

For a little while no word is spoken. It seems as if no words are theirs to speak. Rylton, standing on the hearthrug, has nothing to look at save her back, that is so determinedly turned towards him. She is leaning over the plants in one of the windows, pretending to busy herself with their leaves.

"Won't you speak to me?" says Rylton at last.

He goes to her, and so stands that she is forced to let him see her face—a face beautiful, but pale and unkind, and with the eyes so steadfastly lowered. And yet he

"Knows they must be there,
Sweet eyes behind those lashes fair,
That will not raise their rim."

"I *have* spoken," says Tita.

"When?"

"I said, 'How d'ye do' to you."

"Nonsense" says he; and then, "I don't believe you said even so much. You gave me your hand, that was all; and that you gave reluctantly."

"Well, I can't help it," slowly. "Remember what I told you that last day."

"I don't want to remember anything," says he earnestly. "I want to start afresh—from this hour. And yet—there *is* one thing I must recall. You said—that last day—there was no love between us—that," slowly, "was not true. There is love on one side, at all events. Tita"—taking a step towards her—"I——"

She makes a sudden, wild gesture, throwing out her hands as if to ward off something.

"*Don't!*" cries she in a stifled voice. "Don't say it!"

"I must! I *will!*" says Rylton passionately. "I love you!" There is a dead silence, and in it he says again, "I love you!"

For a moment Tita looks as if she were going to faint; then the light returns to her eyes, the colour to her face.

"First her, then me," says she.

"Will you never forgive that?" asks he. "And it was *before* I saw you. When I did see you—Tita, do try to believe this much, at all events, that after our marriage I was true to you. I think now, that from the first moment I saw you I loved you. But I did not know it, and——"

"That is not all," says Tita in a low tone.

"I know—about Hescott. I beg your pardon about that. I was mad, I think; but the madness arose out of jealousy. I could not bear to think you were happy with him, *_un_*happy with me. If I had loved another, would I have cared with *whom* you were happy?"

"I don't know," says Tita.

There is something so forlorn in the sad little answer—something so forlorn in her whole attitude, indeed—the droop of her head, the sorrowful clasping of her small hands before her—that Rylton's heart burns within him.

"Be just—be just to me," cries he; "give me a chance. I confess I married you for your money. But now that accursed money is all gone (for which I thank heaven), and our positions are reversed. The money now is mine, and I come to you, and fling it at your feet, and implore you from my very soul to forgive me, and take me back."

She still remains silent, and her silence cuts him to the heart.

"What can I say? What can I do to move you?" exclaims he, in a low tone, but one that trembles. "Is your heart dead to me? Have I killed any hope that might have been mine? Is it too late in the day to call myself your lover?"

At this she lifts her hands and covers her face. All at once he knows that she is crying. He goes to her quickly, and lays his arm round her shoulder.

"Let me begin again," says he. "Trust me once more. I know well, Tita, that you do not love me yet, but perhaps in time you will forgive me, and take me to your heart. I am sorry, darling, for every angry word I have ever said to you, but in every one of those angry words there was love for you, and you alone. I thought only of you, only I did not know it. Tita, say you will begin life again with me."

"I—I *couldn't* go to The Place," says Tita. A shudder shakes her frame. "It was there I first heard—It was there your mother told me of——"

"I know—I know; and I don't ask you to go there. I think I told you I had bought a new place. Come there with me."

"Why do you want me to go with you," asks she, lifting her mournful eyes to his, "when you know I do not love you?"

"Yes; I know that." He pauses. "I ask you for many reasons, and not all selfish ones. I ask you for your own sake more than all. The world is cruel, Tita, to a woman who deliberately lives away from her husband; and, besides——"

"I don't care about the world."

"We all care about the world sooner or later, and, besides, you who have been accustomed to money all your life cannot find your present income sufficient for you, and Margaret may marry."

"Oh yes! Yes; I think so." For the first time she shows some animation. "I *hope* so. You saw them talking together to-day?"

"I did." There is a slight pause, and then: "You are glad for Margaret. You wish everyone"—reproachfully—"to be happy except me."

She shakes her head.

"Give me a kind word before I go," says Rylton earnestly.

"What can I say?"

"Say that you will think of what I have been urging."

"One *must* think," says she, in a rather refractory tone.

"You promise, then?"

"Yes; I shall think."

"Until to-morrow, then," says he, holding out his hand.

"To-morrow?"

She looks troubled.

"Yes; to-morrow. Don't forbid me to come to-morrow."

He presses her hand.

The troubled look still rests upon her face as she turns away from him, having bidden him good-bye. The last memory of her he takes away with him is of a little slender figure standing at the window, with her hands clasped behind her back. She does not look back at him.

* * * * *

"Well?" says Margaret, coming into the room half an hour later. "Why, what a little snowflake you are! Come up to the fire and warm those white cheeks. Was it Maurice made you look like that? I shall scold him. What did he say to you?"

"He wants me to go back to him."

"Yes?" anxiously.

"Well— That's all."

"But you, dearest?"

"Oh, I can't *bear* to think of it!" cries Tita, in a miserable tone.

At this Margaret feels hope dying within her. Beyond question she has again refused to be reconciled to him. Margaret is so fond of the girl that it goes to her very heart to see her thus wilfully (as she believes) throwing away her best chance of happiness in this world.

"Tita, have you well considered what you are doing? A woman separated from her husband, no matter how free from blame she may be, is always regarded with coldness by—"

"Oh, yes! I know," impatiently. "*He* has been saying all that."

"And, after all, what has Maurice done that you should be so hard with him? Many a man has loved another woman before his marriage. That old story—"

"It isn't that," says Tita suddenly. "It is"—she lays her hands on Margaret's shoulders, and regards her earnestly and with agitation—"it is that I fear *myself*."

"You fear"—uncertainly—"that you don't love him?"

"Pshaw!" says Tita, letting her go, and rising to her feet, as though to sit still is impossible to her. "What a speech from you to me—you, who know all! *Love* him! I am sure about that, at all events. I know I don't."

"Are you so sure?"

"Positive—*positive!*"

"What? Not even *one* doubt?"

"Not one."

"What is your fear, then?" asks Margaret.

"That even if I went back to him, took up my old position, asked his guests to our house, and so on, that sooner or later I should quarrel with him a second time, and then this dreadful work would have to be done all over again."

"That would rest in your own hands. Of course, it is a risk, if, indeed, you mean what you say, Tita"—watching her closely—"that you do not care for Maurice. But"—anxiously—"at all events, you do not care for anyone else?"

"No—no—no" petulantly—"why should I? I think all men more trouble than they are worth."

"If that is so, and you are heart-whole, I think it your positive duty to live with your husband," says Margaret, with decision. "How can you hesitate, Tita? Are the vows you uttered at the altar nothing to you? Many a woman lives with a bad husband through conscientious motives, and——"

"I don't believe it," says Tita, who is evidently in one of her most wayward moods. "They go on living with their horrid husbands because they are afraid of what people will say about them. You know you said something about it yourself just now, and so did—*he*; something about the world being disagreeable to any woman, however good, who is separated from the man she married."

Margaret gives up the argument.

"Well," says she, smiling, "at all events, Maurice isn't a horrid husband."

"You say that because he isn't yours," with a shrug.

"Come back here, you bad child," says Margaret, laughing now, "and listen to me for a little while longer. You know, Tita, darling, that I have your interest, and yours only, at heart. Promise me you will at least think of what Maurice proposes."

"Oh, I've promised *him* that," says Tita, frowning.

"You have?" cries Margaret. "Oh, you *good* girl! Come! that's right. And so you parted not altogether at war? How glad I am! And he—he was glad, too. He"—anxiously—"he said——"

"He said he was coming again to-morrow," with apparent disgust.

"To get your answer?"

"Oh, I suppose so! I don't know, I'm sure," with such a sharp gesture as proves to Margaret her patience has come to an end. "Let us forget it—put it from us—while we can." She laughs nervously. "You see what a temper I have! He will repent his bargain, I think—if I do consent. Come, let us talk of something else, Meg—of you."

"Of me?"

"What better subject? Tell me what Colonel Neilson was saying to you in that window this evening," pointing to the one farthest off.

"Nothing—nothing at all. He is so stupid," says Margaret, blushing crimson. "He really never sees me without proposing all over again, as if there was any good in it."

"And what did you say this time?"

Margaret grows confused.

"Really, dearest, I was so taken up thinking of you and Maurice," says she, with a first (and most flagrant) attempt at dissimulation, "that I believe I forgot to—to—say anything."

Tita gives way to a burst of irrepressible laughter.

"I like that," says she. "Well, at all events, by your own showing, you didn't say *no*."

HOW TITA RECEIVES A BASKET OF FLOWERS AND AN ENTREATY; AND HOW SHE CEASES TO FIGHT AGAINST HER DESTINY.

It is quite early, barely eleven o'clock, and a most lovely morning. Tita and Margaret, who have just settled down in the latter's boudoir, presumably to write their letters, but actually to have a little gossip, are checked by the entrance of a servant, who brings something to Tita and lays it on the table beside her.

"With Sir Maurice Rylton's compliments," says the servant.

"What is it?" says Tita, when he has gone, with the air of one who instinctively knows, but would prefer to go on guessing about it.

"Not dynamite, assuredly," says Margaret. "What a delightful basket!"

"What can be inside it?"

"The best way to find that out is to open it," says Margaret, with abominable briskness. "Shall I cut these pretty ribbons, or will you?"

"No, *don't* cut them," says Tita quickly.

She draws the basket towards her, and slowly and with care unties the true lover's knot of pale blue ribbon that fastens it.

"Flowers, I expect," says Margaret.

"But tied up like this?"

"That is because there is a letter inside it."

"You seem to know all about it," says Tita, at which Margaret grows a little red, and wishes, like the parrot, that she had not spoken.

"Yes; it is flowers," says Tita.

"Such flowers!" cries Margaret. And, indeed, it is a rare basketful of Nature's sweetest gifts that lies before them. Delicate reds, and waxen whites, and the tender greens of the waving fern. "How beautiful!" exclaims Margaret.

Tita has said nothing. But now she puts out her hand.

"What is that?" says she.

"Why, the letter," says Margaret, forgetting her late discomfiture in the excitement of this new discovery.

Tita draws it forth reluctantly. It is tied to a little plant—a tiny plant of pale forget-me-not.

"What can he have to write about?" says she. "Perhaps it is to say he is not coming to-day; let us hope so. But what does this plant mean?"

She opens the envelope with disdainful fingers. It does not, however, contain a letter, after all. It is only a verse scribbled on a card:

"If you will touch, and take, and pardon,
What I can give;
Take this, a flower, into your garden,
And bid it live."

Neither of them speaks for a moment.

"It is a pretty message," says Margaret at last.

"Yes."

Tita's face is turned aside. Her hand is still resting on the table, the verse and the little plant within it.

"He will be coming soon," says Margaret again.

"Yes, I know."

"You will be kind to him, dearest?"

"That—I *don't* know."

"Oh! I *think* you do," says Margaret; "I think you must see that he——"

"Let me think it out, Meg," says Tita, turning a very pale face to hers. "When he comes tell him I am in the small drawing-room."

She kisses Margaret and leaves the room. The basket of flowers, too, she has left behind her. But Margaret can see that she has taken with her the tiny plant of forget-me-not.

* * * * *

He comes quickly towards her, holding out his hand.

"Margaret said I should find you here," says he. Hope, mingled with great fear, is in his glance. He holds the hand she gives him. "Have you kept your promise?" he asks her. "Have you thought of it?"

"I am tired of thinking," says she, with a long sigh.

"And your decision?"

"Oh! it shall be as you wish," cries she, dragging her hand out of his, and walking backwards from him till she reaches the wall, where she stays, leaning against it as if glad of its support, and glancing at him from under her long lashes. "You shall have your own way. You have always had it. You will have it to the end, I suppose."

"You consent, then!" exclaims her.

"Ah! That is all you think of. To save appearances! You"—her breath coming quickly—"you care nothing for what *I* am feeling——"

"Don't wrong me like that," says Rylton, interrupting her. "If you could read my heart you would know that it is of you alone I think. For you I have thought out everything. You shall be your own mistress—— I shall not interfere with you in any way. I ask you to be my wife, so far as entertaining our guests goes, and the arranging of the household, and that—— No more! You shall be free as air. Do you think that I do not know I have sinned towards you?" He breaks off in some agitation, and then goes on. "I tell you I shall not for one moment even question a wish of yours."

"I should not like that," says Tita sadly. "That would keep me as I was: always an outsider; a stranger; a guest in my own house."

Rylton walks to the window and back again. A stranger! *Had* she felt like a stranger in her own house? It hurts him terribly.

"It was I who should have been the stranger," says he. "It was all yours—and yet—did I really make you so unhappy?"

There is something so cruel in his own condemnation of himself that Tita's heart melts.

"It is all over," says she. "It is at an end. If"—with a sad, strange little glance at him—"we must come together again, let us not begin the new life with recriminations. Perhaps I have been hard to you—Margaret says I have—and if so——" Tears rise in her eyes and choke her utterance. She turns aside from him, and drums with her fingers on the table near her. "I thought those flowers so pretty," says she.

"I didn't know what to send," returns he, in a voice as low as her own.

"I liked them."

"Did you?" He looks at her. "And yet you are not wearing one of them—not even a bud. I said to myself, when I was coming here, that if you wore one I should take hope from it."

"Flowers die," says she, with her eyes upon the ground.

"Cut flowers. But I sent you a little plant."

"Forget-me-not would not live in town."

"But we shall not live in town. You have promised to come to the country with me," says he quickly. "And even if this plant dies, another can grow—a new one. I told you that I bought a place. It—it is in the same county as Oakdean."

"Ah! Oakdean!" A pathetic look grows within her large eyes. She turns aside. "I *dread* the country now that my old house is gone—I—" Suddenly she gives way, and bursts into a storm of tears. "Everything seems gone!" cries she. "But if I *must* seek a new home let me go to it at once. Don't let me think about it. Take me there as soon as ever you can."

"To-morrow," says Rylton, "if you wish."

"Yes, yes," feverishly, "to-morrow."

She is sobbing bitterly.

"Tita," says Rylton, who is now very pale, "if it costs you so much, I give up my plan. Stay with Margaret—stay where you like, only let me provide for you."

"No, I shall go with you," says Tita, making a violent effort to suppress her sobs. "It is arranged, I tell you. Only let me go *at once*. I cannot stand the thinking of it day by day."

"To-morrow, then, by the evening train; will that suit you?"

"Yes."

"I shall call for you here?"

"Yes."

"Remember our compact. You shall be as free as air."

"I know."

He goes to her, and, taking her head between his hands, kisses her forehead. He would have liked to take her in his arms and kiss her with all his heart, but something forbids him.

"Good-bye, Tita."

"Good-bye."

He has his hand upon her shoulder now.

"Do you know you have never once called me by my name," says he.

"Have I not?" mournfully.

"Not once; and if we are to be friends—friends, at least—you might—" He pauses, but no answer comes. "Well, good-bye," says he again.

He is half-way across the room when she says: "Good-bye, Maurice," in a faint tone, like a child repeating a lesson.

The sorrow in Rylton's heart is deeper as he leaves the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW A JOURNEY IS BEGUN AS THE DAY DIES DOWN; AND HOW THAT JOURNEY ENDS; AND HOW A GREAT SECRET IS DISCOVERED—THE SECRET OF TITA'S HEART.

The parting between Margaret and Tita had taken a long time. There had been many admonitions from the former, and entreaties from the latter, principally about Margaret's coming to see her as soon as possible. These precious moments had been broken in upon by Colonel Neilson, who had sent up word by one of the servants that he asked a few minutes' conversation with Miss Knollys.

Those minutes had grown into a quarter of an hour, and then Margaret had come back looking

decidedly guilty, but rather inclined to a tearful mirth.

"You needn't speak," said Tita, with a pretence at contempt. "You didn't say 'No' on Sunday, and you have said 'Yes' to-day. It is quite simple."

"Well, it is all your fault," Margaret had returned, sinking into a chair, and beginning to laugh rather shamefacedly. "If you had stayed with me it never would have happened. But you have shown me how delightful companionship is, and having shown it, you basely desert me. And now—I feel so lonely that —"

"That?"

"I have broken through all my vows, and said——"

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"You must *both* come down and stay with me as soon as ever you can," said Tita, giving her a tender hug.

* * * * *

The long sweet summer evening is growing into night as the train draws up at the old station that Tita knows so well. She looks out of the window, her heart in her eyes, taking in all the old signs—the guard fussy as ever—Evans the porter (she nods to him through eyes filled with tears)—the glimpse of the church spire over the top of the station-house—the little damp patch in the roof of the booking-office.

She almost starts, so deep is her reverie, as Rylton lays a hand upon her shoulder.

"Come," says he, smiling.

"Why——" begins she, surprised. She sees he has her travelling-bag in his hand, and that he wants to pass her to open the window.

"This is our station," says he.

"This?"

"Yes. I think I told you the new place I had bought was in this county."

"Yes. I know, but so near——"

Rylton has opened the door, and is calling to a porter. Evan comes up.

"Welcome home, my lady," says he, touching his cap to Tita, who gives him a little nod in return, whilst feeling that her heart is breaking.

"Home!" She feels as if she hates poor Evans, and yet of course he had meant nothing. No doubt he thought she was coming back to Oakdean. Dear, *dear* Oakdean, now lost to her for ever!

A carriage is waiting for them, and Rylton, putting her into it, goes away to see to their luggage. Tita, sitting drearily within, her heart sad with recollections of the past, is suddenly struck by a sound that comes to her through the shut windows of the carriage. She opens the one nearest to her and listens.

It is only a poor vagrant on the pavement without, singing for a penny or two. But the song goes to her very heart:

"It's hame, and its hame—hame fain wad I be,
O! hame, hame, hame, to my ain countree."

A sob rises in her throat. So near to her own dear home, and yet so far. She finds her purse, and hastily flings half a crown to the poor wretch outside, who never guesses why she got so large a dole.

And now Rylton returns. He gets in. The carriage drives away through the well-remembered town, over the old bridge, and into the sweetness of the sleeping country.

Already the stars are out. Through the warm bank of dying sunset over there a pale little dot is glimmering. Steel-gray are the heavens, fast deepening into darkest blue, and over the hills, far, far away, the faint suggestion of a "young May moon" is growing. A last faint twittering of birds is in the air, and now it ceases, and darkness falls and grows, and shadows fill the land and hide the edges of the moors, and blacken the sides of the walls as they drive past them.

Tita is always peering out of the window. At a sudden turn in the road she draws back as if hurt.

"This is the turn to Oakdean!" says she sharply.

"Yes; we are going this road."

"It must be near, then, this new place—*quite* near?"

"It is near."

She looks at him for a moment, her face fraught with great grief.

"Oh, how *could* you?" says she. "How *could* you have bought a place so close to it?"

She leans back into her corner, and it is his misery at this moment that he cannot know whether she is crying or not. Presently she starts forward again.

"Why, we are going down the road!" cries she. "We shall go past the gates!" She waits as if for an answer, but he makes her none. "Oh, you *should* have told me," says she faintly.

He puts out his hand and takes hers. She does not repulse him, and he holds it in a close clasp. Is there some magnetic influence at work that tells her all the truth—that betrays to her his secret? She turns suddenly and looks at him, but he refuses to meet her glance. He can feel that she is trembling violently. Her hand is still in his, and her eyes are fixed intently on the open window near her.

And now they are nearing Oakdean. She can see the pillars of the gates. A little cry escapes her. And now, *now* they are *at* the gate—soon they will be past—

But what is this? The coachman has drawn up! They stop! The groom springs down—someone from the lodge rushes quickly out. The gates are flung wide. The horses dash down the avenue!

* * * * *

Presently they draw up at the hall door—the door of Oakdean!

Rylton, getting out, takes her in his arms, and places her on the first step of the stones that lead to the hall.

Not one word has passed between them since that last reproach of hers.

And now they have reached the library. It is brilliantly lit. Tita, flinging off her wraps in a mechanical sort of way, looks round her. Nothing is changed—nothing! It is *home*. Home really—home as it always had been!

She is pale as a little ghost! Though she has looked at the room, she has not once looked at *him*! And, with a sort of feeling that he has made a bid for her favour, Rylton makes no attempt to go to her or say a word.

She is so silent, so calm, that doubts arise within him as to the success of his experiment—for experiment it must be called. He had bought in the old house expressly to please her the moment he was in a position to do so; had bought it, indeed, when she was showing a most settled determination to have nothing to do with him—directly after her refusal to accept a competence at his hands.

And now, how will it be? Her eyes are wandering round the room, noting each dear familiar object; at last they come to Rylton.

He is looking back at her—a little sad, a little hopeless. Their eyes meet.

Then all at once she gives way. She runs to him, and flings herself into his open arms.

"To do this for me! *This!*" cries she.

She clings to him. Her voice dies away.

She is lying on his breast. He can feel her heart beating against his. His arms tighten round her.

"Tita, you love me!" whispers he, in a low tone, passionately.

She feels so small a thing in his embrace—a mere child of fourteen might be a bigger thing than she is. The knowledge that she has grown very thin during their estrangement goes to his heart like a knife. Oh, dear little, *darling* girl!

"You must love me—you *must*," says he, holding her to him, as if he could never let her go. "*Try* to love me, Tita."

Slowly, very slowly, she stirs within his arms. She looks up at him. It is such a strange look. It transfigures the beautiful little face, making it even more beautiful than it was before. But Maurice, who is hanging on it, to whom it means life or death, does not dare translate the expression. It seems to him that she is going into all that intolerable past and reading his very soul. God grant she may read it aright!

The strain grows too terrible; he breaks it.

"My darling, speak!" entreats he.

She wakes as if from a dream.

"Oh, I love you—I do love you!" cries she. She lays her hands against his breast, and leans back from him. "I have loved you always, I think; but now I know it. Oh, Maurice, love me too, and not *her—not her!*"

* * * * *

It is half an hour later. He has induced her to eat something; and at her request has eaten something himself—as a fact, being both young, they were both extremely hungry, and are now feeling infinitely better.

"I want a fresh handkerchief," says Tita, looking up at him shyly, but with a smile that shows all her pretty teeth. "*See* how you have made me cry!" She holds up the little damp rag that she has been using since her arrival. "Give me one out of my bag."

Opening her bag to get the handkerchief desired, something else falls to the floor—a small thing. He picks it up.

"Why, what is this?" says he.

"Oh, it is my— Give it to me. It is my forget-me-not," says she, colouring hotly.

A pause.

"The little plant I sent?" asks he softly.

"Yes," in a lovely, shamefaced way.

"You kept that?"

"To plant it here."

"Because—"

"Oh, you *know*."

"Tell me again."

"Because I love you."

She throws her arms around his neck, and their lips meet.

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

Obvious typographical errors silently corrected by the transcriber:

volume 1 Chapter 4 : =Marry me as I am, and for what I am in your sight, and seek a new life with me abroad.=
silently corrected as =Marry me as I am, and for what I am in your sight, and seek a new life with me abroad.=

volume 1 chapter 6 : ="They laugh who win," is an old proverb.= silently corrected as ="They laugh who win,' is an
old proverb.=

volume 1 chapter 9 : =Rickfort is my house, too, but I hate it; it is so gloomy." I'm sure," with a shrug of her
shoulders= silently corrected as =Rickfort is my house, too, but I hate it; it is so gloomy. I'm sure," with a shrug of
her shoulders=

volume 1 chapter 10 : ="God heavens, yes!" says his mother= silently corrected as ="Good heavens, yes!" says his
mother=

volume 1 chapter 21 : =she'll always be able to tell you something about them you never heard before."= silently
corrected as =she'll always be able to tell you something about them you never heard before=

volume 1 chapter 22 : ="Many I night I saw the Pleiads, rising through the mellow shade,= silently corrected as
="Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising through the mellow shade,=

volume 1 chapter 27 : ="Oh, Randal!" you are too stupid for anything," says Tita, showing all her pretty teeth=
Silently corrected as ="Oh, Randal! you are too stupid for anything," says Tita, showing all her pretty teeth.=

volume 2 chapter 1 : ="Oh, do, *do* stop," says Margaret, lifting her hand. "You are getting on that—that wretched
old tack again.= silently corrected as ="Oh, do, *do* stop," says Margaret, lifting her hand. "You are getting on that—
that wretched old tack again."=

volume 2 chapter 2 : =Tita's determination not to accept the olive branch he offered her yesterday is before him
too. What if she—="= silently corrected as =Tita's determination not to accept the olive branch he offered her
yesterday is before him too. What if she—=

volume 2 chapter 4 : ="I know—I know," says she. "If is a dishonourable thought,= silently corrected as "=I know—I
know," says she. "It is a dishonourable thought,=

volume 2 chapter 8 : ="Yes, you? When I left home this morning, what was the last word I said to you? =silently
corrected as= "Yes, you! When I left home this morning, what was the last word I said to you? =

volume 2 chapter 8 : =words seem to fail her. Oh! I should like to *shake* you," says she at last.= silently corrected
as =words seem to fail her. "Oh! I should like to *shake* you," says she at last.=

volume 2 chapter 8 : ="She has come close up to him. Her charming face is uplifted to his.= silently corrected as
=She has come close up to him. Her charming face is uplifted to his.=

volume 2 chapter 17 : ="You forget," says he coldly, "that you are married to me. It is not so simple a matter as you
seem to imagine for a wife to throw off her marriage yoke.= silently corrected as "=You forget," says he coldly,
"that you are married to me. It is not so simple a matter as you seem to imagine for a wife to throw off her
marriage yoke."=

volume 2 chapter 17 : =" 'Alone I did it!' To-day I set you free!" =silently corrected as =" 'Alone I did it!' To-day I
set you free!"=

volume 2 chapter 22 : =It is the mynd that maketh good or ill," says the old poet.= silently corrected as ="It is the
mynd that maketh good or ill," says the old poet.=

volume 2 chapter 23 =: "You loved me once. You loved me. Oh, Maurice, smiting her hands together,= silently corrected as "=You loved me once. You loved me. Oh, Maurice," smiting her hands together,=

volume 2 chapter 25 : =Maurice will understand."= Silently corrected as =Maurice will understand.=

Volume 2 chapter 25 : =says Rylton, interrupting her quickly. Speak for yourself only. For my part,= silently corrected as =says Rylton, interrupting her quickly. "Speak for yourself only. For my part,=

volume 2 chapter 26 : ="I really *don't* know," says Margaret, "bringing a dignified eye to bear upon him=. Silently corrected as ="I really *don't* know," says Margaret, bringing a dignified eye to bear upon him.=

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