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Title: Flaming June

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Release date: April 17, 2007 [eBook #21119]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FLAMING JUNE \*\*\*

Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

"Flaming June"

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### Chapter One.

Somewhere on the West coast of England, about a hundred miles from the metropolis, there stands a sleepy little town, which possesses no special activity nor beauty to justify its existence. People live in it for reasons of their own. The people who do *not* live in it wonder for *what* reasons, but attain no better solution of the mystery than the statement that the air is very fine. "We have such bracing air!" says the resident, as proudly as if that said air were his special invention and property. Certain West-country doctors affect Norton-on-Sea for patients in need of restful change, and their melancholy advent justifies the existence of the great hotel on the esplanade, and the row of bath-chairs at the corner. There are ten bath-chairs in all, and on sunny days ten crumpled-looking old ladies can generally be seen sitting inside their canopies, trundling slowly along the esplanade, accompanied by a paid companion, dressed in black and looking sorry for herself. Occasionally on Saturdays and Sundays a pretty daughter, or a tall son takes the companion's place, but as sure as Monday arrives they disappear into space. One can imagine that one hears them bidding their farewells—"So glad to see you getting on so well, mother dear! I positively *must* rush back to town to attend to a hundred duties. It's a comfort to feel that you are so well placed. Miss Biggs is a treasure, and this air is so bracing!..."

The esplanade consists of four rows of lodging-houses and two hotels, in front of which is a strip of grass, on which a band plays twice a week during the summer months, and the school-children twice a day all the year long. The invalids in the hotel object to the children and make unsuccessful attempts to banish them from their pitch, and the children in their turn regard the invalids with frank disdain, and make audible and uncomplimentary surmises as to the nature of their complaints as the procession of chairs trundles by.

In front of the green, and separating it from the steep, pebbly shore, are a number of fishermen's shanties, bathing machines, and hulks of old vessels stretched in a long, straggling row, while one larger shed stands back from the rest, labelled "Lifeboat" in large white letters.

Parallel with the esplanade runs the High Street, a narrow thoroughfare showing shops crowded with the useless little articles which are supposed to prove irresistibly attractive to visitors to the seaside. At the bazaar a big white label proclaims that everything in the window is to be sold at the astounding price of "eleven-three," and the purchaser is free to make his choice from such treasures as work-boxes lined in crimson plush, and covered with a massed pattern in shells; desks fitted with all the implements for writing, scent bottles tied with blue ribbons; packets of stationery with local views, photograph frames in plush and gelatine, or to select more perishable trophies in glass and china, all solemnly guaranteed to be worth double the price.

At the photographer's, a few yards farther along, a visitor can have his portrait taken a yard square, the size of a postage stamp, or on a postcard to send to his friends. Ingenious backgrounds are on hand, representing appropriate seaside scenes in which the sitter has nothing to do but to press his face against a hole on the canvas, and these are extensively patronised, for what can be more convenient than to stand on solid earth, attired in sober, everyday clothing, yet be portrayed splashing in the waves in the spandiest of French bathing costumes, riding a donkey along the sands, or manfully hauling down the sails of a yacht!

Mr Photographer Sykes is a man of resource, and deserves the prosperity which is the envy of his neighbours. Mrs Sykes wears silk linings to her skirts on Sundays, and rustles like the highest in the land. She had three new hats in one summer, and the fishmonger's wife knows for a fact that not one of the number costs less than "twenty-five-six."

The High Street and the esplanade constitute the new Norton-on-Sea which has sprung into being within the last ten years, but the real, original, aristocratic Norton lies a couple of miles inland, and consists of a wide, sloping street, lined with alternate shops and houses, branching off from which are a number of sleepy roads, in which detached and semi-detached villas hide themselves behind trees and hedges, and barricade their windows with stiff, white curtains. The one great longing actuating the Norton householder seems to be to see nothing, and to be seen by none. "Is the

house overlooked?" they ask the agent anxiously on the occasion of the first application. "Does it overlook any other house?"

"There *is* another house across the road, madam!" the agent is sometimes regretfully obliged to admit, "but it has been very cleverly planted out."

So it has! by means of a fir or an elm planted within a few yards of the windows, and blocking out something more important than another villa, but the Norton resident desires privacy above all things. The sun and the air have to creep in as best they may.

The more aristocratic the position of a family, the more secluded becomes their position. Fences are raised by an arrangement of lattice-work on the top of boards; shrubs are planted thickly inside the hedges; even the railings of the gates are backed by discreetly concealing boards. If there happens to be a rise in the road from which a passer-by can catch a glimpse of white figures darting to and fro on the tennis courts, the owner promptly throws up a bank, and plants on the top one or two quickly growing limes. It is so disagreeable to be overlooked!

At the date at which this history opens, there were several large places in the neighbourhood of Norton, foremost among them were the Manor House, occupied by the young squire, Geoffrey Greville, and Madame, his mother; Green Arbour, owned by Admiral Perry, who had married the widow of the late High Sheriff; and The Meads, the ofttime deserted seat of a rich London banker.

With these exceptions, quite the most aristocratic dwellings were situated in what was known as "The Park," though perhaps "The Crescent" would have been the more appropriate name, for the twelve houses were built on one side of a curving road, looking out on a charming stretch of land, dipping down to a miniature lake, and rising again to a soft green knoll, surmounted by a bank of trees. The carefully-mowed grass looked like softest velvet, and might be seen, but not touched, being surrounded by tiny wire arches, and protected by wooden boards, requesting visitors to keep to the paths, and not trespass on the "verges." Impressive title! Visitors were likewise requested not to touch the flowering shrubs; not to pick the flowers; not to throw rubbish into the lake, or to inscribe their initials on the seats. These rules being carefully observed, the twelve householders who paid for the upkeep of these decorous gardens were free to enjoy such relaxations as could be derived from gravel paths, and wooden benches.

The view from their windows the residents apparently did not wish to enjoy, for they planted their trees and heightened their fences as industriously as the owners of the fifty-pound villas in Hill Street. Mrs Garnett, at Buona Vista, having a garden deficient in foliage, had even erected a temporary trellis at the end of the lawn, and covered it with creepers, rather than face the indignity of an open view. It gave her such a "feeling of publicity" to see the neighbours pass to and fro!

It was only the residents themselves who enjoyed the proud privilege of pacing the Park unmolested, for at either entrance stood small eaved lodges in which were housed the two gardeners and their wives. To be lodge-keeper to the Park was as great a guarantee of respectability in Norton as to be vicar of the parish church itself. Only middle-aged, married, teetotal, childless churchmen could apply for the posts, and among their scant ranks the most searching inquiries were instituted before an appointment was finally arranged. It is safe to affirm that no working couples on earth were more clean, industrious, and alive to their duty towards their betters, than the occupants of the North and South Lodges of Norton Park!

All day long the two husbands mowed grass, clipped hedges, and swept up gravel paths; all day long the wives scrubbed and dusted their immaculate little houses, keeping a weather-eye on the door to see who passed to and fro. Their duty it was to pounce out on any stranger who dared attempt to force an entrance through the hallowed portals, and send them back discomfited.

"You can't come this way, madam! This road is private!"

"Can't I just walk straight through on the path? It is so much nearer than going all the way round!"

"The park is private, madam; there is no thoroughfare."

Occasionally some child of sin would endeavour to prevaricate.

"I wish to pay a call!"

"Which house did you wish to go to, madam?"

"Er—Buona Vista!"

"Buona Vistas is away from home. They won't be back till the end of the month."

Foiled in her attempts the miscreant would have to retrace her steps, or make her way round by the narrow lane by means of which the tradesmen made their way to the back-doors of these secluded dwellings.

Perhaps the most unpromisingly decorous house in the Park was christened "The Nook," with that appalling lack of humour which is nowhere portrayed more strikingly than in the naming of suburban residences. It stood fair and square in the middle of the crescent; and from garret to cellar there was not a nooky corner on which the eye could light. Two drawing-room windows flanked the front door on the left; two dining-room windows on the right. There was not even a gable or a dormer to break the square solidity of the whole. Fourteen windows in all, each chastely shrouded in Nottingham lace curtains, looped back by yellow silk bands, fastened, to a fraction of an inch, at the same height from the sill, while *Aspidistra* plants, mounted on small tables, were artfully placed so as to fill up the space necessarily left in the centre. They were handsome plants of venerable age, which Mason, the parlourmaid,

watered twice a week, sponging their leaves with milk before she replaced them in their pots.

It was a typical early Victorian residence, inhabited by a spinster lady of early Victorian type and her four henchwomen—Heap the cook, Mary the housemaid, Mason the parlourmaid, and Jane the tweeny. Four women, plus a boot-boy, to wait upon the wants of one solitary person, yet in conclave with the domestic at The Croft to the right, and The Holt to the left, Miss Briskett's maids were wont to assert that they were worked off their feet. It was, as has been said, an early Victorian household, conducted on early Victorian lines. Other people might be content to buy half their supplies ready-made from the stores, but Miss Briskett insisted on home-made bread, home-made jams and cakes; home-made pickles and sauces; home-cured tongues and hams, and home-made liqueurs. Cook kept the tweeny busy in the kitchen, while Mary grumbled at having to keep half a dozen unused bedrooms in spick and span perfection, and Mason spent her existence in polishing, and sweeping invisible grains of dust from out-of-the-way-corners.

As a rule the domestic wheel turned on oiled wheels and Miss Briskett's existence flowed on its even course, from one year's end to another, with little but the weather to differentiate one month from another, but on the day on which this history begins, a thunderbolt had fallen in the shape of a letter bearing a New York post-mark, which the postman handed in at the door of The Nook at the three o'clock delivery. Miss Briskett read its contents, and gasped; read them again, and trembled; read them a third time, and sat buried in thought for ten minutes by the clock, at the expiration of which time she opened her own desk, and penned a note to her friend and confidant, Mrs Ramsden, of The Holt—

"My dear Friend,—I have just received a communication from America which is causing me considerable perturbation. If your engagements will allow, I should be grateful if you will take tea with me this afternoon, and give me the benefit of your wise counsel. Pray send a verbal answer by bearer.—Yours sincerely,—

"Sophia A Briskett."

The trim Mason took the note to its destination, and waited in the hall while Mrs Ramsden wrote her reply. The reference to a verbal answer was only a matter of form. Miss Briskett would have been surprised and affronted to receive so unceremonious a reply to her invitation—

"My dear Friend,—It will give me pleasure to take tea with you this afternoon, as you so kindly suggest. I trust that the anxiety under which you are labouring may be of a temporary nature, and shall be thankful indeed if I can in any way assist to bring about its solution.—Most truly yours,—

"Ellen Bean Ramsden."

"The best china, Mason, and a teapot for two!" was Miss Briskett's order on receipt of this cordial response, and an hour later the two ladies sat in conclave over a daintily-spread table in the drawing-room of The Nook.

Miss Briskett was a tall, thin woman of fifty-eight or sixty, wearing a white cap perched upon her grey hair, and an expression of frosty propriety on her thin, pointed features. Frosty is the adjective which most accurately describes her appearance. One felt a moral conviction that she would suffer from chilblains in winter, that the long, thin fingers must be cold to the touch, even on this bright May day; that the tip of her nose was colder still, that she could not go to sleep at night without a hot bottle to her feet. She was addicted to grey dresses, composed of stiff and shiny silk, and to grey bonnets glittering with steely beads. She creaked, as she moved, and her thin figure was whale-boned into an unnatural rigidity.

Mrs Ramsden was, in appearance at least, a striking contrast to her friend, being a dumpy little woman, in whose demeanour good-nature vied with dignity. She was dressed in black, and affected an upright feather in front of her bonnets. "To give me height, my dear!"

In looking at her one was irresistibly reminded of a pouter pigeon strutting along on its short little legs, preening its sleek little head to and fro above its protuberant breast.

"Read that!" said Miss Briskett, tragically, handing the thin sheet of paper to her friend, and Mrs Ramsden put on her spectacles and read as follows—

"My dear Sister,—Business connected with mines makes it necessary for me to go out West for the next few months, and the question has arisen how to provide for Cornelia meantime. I had various notions, but she prefers her own (she generally does!), and reckons she can't fill in this gap better than by running over to pay you a visit in the Old Country. I can pick her up in the fall, and have a little trot round before returning. She has friends sailing in the *Lucania* on the 15th, and intends crossing with them. You will just have time to cable to put her off if you are dead, or otherwise incapacitated; but I take it you will be glad to have a look at my girl. She's worth looking at! I shall feel satisfied to know she is with you. She might get up to mischief over here.

"Looking forward to seeing you later on,—Your brother, Edward Briskett."

"P S—Dear Aunt Soph, don't you worry to prepare! I'll just chip in, and take you as you are. We'll have some high old times!—Your niece, Cornelia."

Letter and eye-glasses fell together upon Mrs Ramsden's knee. She raised startled eyes, and blinked dumbly at her friend.

Miss Briskett wagged her head from side to side, and heaved a sepulchral sigh.

The halcyon days of peace were over!

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## Chapter Two.

"My dear," said Mrs Ramsden, solemnly, "this is indeed great news. I don't wonder that you feel unnerved!"

"I do, indeed. The three o'clock post came in, and I was quite surprised when Mary came in with the salver. I was not expecting any letters. I have so few correspondents, and I am mostly in their debt, I am afraid. Still, of course, there are always the circulars. I looked for nothing more exciting, and then—*this* arrived! I really felt that I could not sit alone and think it out by myself all day long. I hope you will forgive me for asking you to come over on such short notice."

"Indeed, I am flattered that you should wish to have me. Do tell me all about this brother. He has lived abroad a long time, I think? It is the eldest, is it not? The rich one—in America?"

"I believe he is rich for the moment. Goodness knows how long it may last," sighed Miss Briskett, dolefully. "He speculates in mines, my dear, and you know what *that* means! Half the time he is a pauper, and the other half a millionaire, and so far as I can gather from his letters he seems just as well satisfied one way as another. He was always a flighty, irresponsible creature, and I fear Cornelia has taken after him."

"She is the only child?"

"Yes! She had an English mother, I'm thankful to say; but poor Sybil died at her birth, and Edward never married again. He was devoted to Sybil, and said he would never give another woman the charge of her child. Such nonsense! As if any man on earth could look after a growing girl, without a woman's help. Instead of a wise, judicious stepmother, she has been left to nurses and governesses, and from what I can hear, has ruled *them*, instead of the other way about. You can see by the tone of her father's letter that he is absurdly prejudiced."

"That is natural, perhaps, with an only child, left to him in such peculiarly sad circumstances. We must not judge him hardly for that," said little Mrs Ramsden, kindly. "Has the girl herself ever written to you before, may I ask, or is this her first communication?"

Miss Briskett's back stiffened, and her thin lips set in a straight line.

"She has addressed little notes to me from time to time; on birthdays, and Christmases, and so on; but to tell you the truth, my dear, I have not encouraged their continuance. They were unduly familiar, and I object to being addressed by abbreviations of my name. Ideas as to what is right and fitting seem to differ on different sides of the Atlantic!"

"They do, indeed. I have always understood that young people are brought into quite undue prominence in American households. And their manners, too! One sees in that postscript—you don't mind my saying so, just between ourselves—a—a *broadness*—"

"Quite so! I feel it myself. I am most grieved, about it. Cornelia is my niece, and Edward is the head of the family. Her position as his only child is one of importance, and I feel distressed that she is so little qualified to adorn it. She has been well educated, I believe; has 'graduated,' as they call it; but she has evidently none of our English polish. Quite in confidence, Mrs Ramsden, I feel that she may be somewhat of a shock to the neighbourhood!"

"You think of receiving her, then? Your brother leaves you the option of refusing, and I should think things over very seriously before incurring such a responsibility. A three-months' visit! I doubt you could not stand the strain! If you excused yourself on the ground of health, no offence could possibly be taken."

But at that Miss Briskett protested strongly.

"Oh, my dear, I could not refuse! Edward wishes to find a home for the girl, and says he would be relieved to have her with me. I could not possibly refuse! I think I may say that I have never yet shirked a duty, distasteful though it might be, and I must not do so now. I shall cable to say that I will be pleased to receive Cornelia, when it suits her to arrive."

Mrs Ramsden crumbled her seed-cake and wondered why—that being the case—she had been summoned to give advice, but being a good-natured soul, smiled assent, and deftly shifted the conversation to the consideration of details.

"Well, dear, I only trust you may be rewarded. Miss Cornelia is fortunate to have such a home waiting to receive her. What room do you propose to dedicate to her use?"

Miss Briskett's face clouded, and she drew a long, despairing sigh.

"That's another thing I am troubled about. I had the best spare room done up only this spring. The carpet had faded, and when I was renewing it I took the opportunity to have in the painters and paperhangers. It is *all* fresh, even the curtains and bed-hangings. They have not once been used."

Mrs Ramsden purred in sympathetic understanding.

"Poor dear! When one has just made a room all fresh and clean, it is *most* trying to have it taken into use! But why give her that room at all, dear? You have several others. A young, unmarried girl should be satisfied with a room at the back, or even on the third storey. You have a nice little guest room over your own bedroom, have you not?"

"No!" Miss Briskett again manifested a noble determination to do her duty. "I should like Edward to feel, when he comes over, that I have paid his daughter all due honour. She must have the spare room, and if she spills things over the new carpet, I must pray for grace to bear it. She has been accustomed to a very luxurious style of living for the last few years, and I daresay even my best room will not be as handsome as her own apartment. In the present state of Edward's finances, she is, I suppose, a very great heiress."

Little Mrs Ramsden stared into her cup with a kindly thoughtfulness.

"I should keep that fact secret, if I were you," she said earnestly. "Poor lassie! it's always a handicap to a girl to be received for what she has, rather than what she is. And there are two or three idle, worthless young men hanging about, who might be only too glad to pick up a rich wife. I should simply announce that I was expecting a niece from the United States of America, to pay me a visit of some months' duration, and offer no enlightenment as to her circumstances. You will have enough responsibility as it is, without embarrassing entanglements."

"Yes, indeed. Thank you so much. I feel sure that your advice is wise, and I shall certainly follow it. There's that soldier nephew of Mrs Mott's, who is constantly running down on short visits. I object intensely to that dashing style! He is just the type of man to run after a girl for her money. I shall take special care that they do not meet. One thing I am determined upon," said Miss Briskett, sternly, "and that is that there shall be no love-making, nor philandering of any kind under my roof. I could not be troubled with such nonsense, nor with the responsibility of it. I am accustomed to a quiet, regular life, and if Cornelia comes to me, she must conform to the regulations of the household. At my age I cannot be expected to alter my ways for the sake of a girl."

"Certainly not. She is a mere girl, I suppose! How old may she be?"

Miss Briskett considered.

"She was born in the winter! I distinctly remember coming in and seeing the cable, and taking off my fur gloves to open it.—It was the year I bought the dining-room carpet. It was just down, I remember, and as we drank the baby's health, the cork flew out of the bottle, and some of the champagne was spilt, and there was a great fuss wiping it up — Twenty-two years ago! Who would have thought it could be so long?"

"Ah, it always pays to get a good thing while you are about it. It costs a great deal at the start, but you have such satisfaction afterwards. It's not a bit faded!" Mrs Ramsden affirmed, alluding, be it understood, to the Turkey carpet, and not to Miss Cornelia Briskett. "Twenty-two. Just a year younger than my Elma! Elma will be glad to have a companion."

"It is kind of you to say so. Nothing would please me better than to see Cornelia become intimate with your daughter. Poor child, she has not had the advantages of an English upbringing; but we must hope that this visit will be productive of much good. She could not have a better example than Elma. She is a type of a sweet, guileless, English girl."

"Ye-es!" asserted the sweet girl's mother, doubtfully; "but you know, dear Miss Briskett, that at times even Elma..." She shook her head, sighed, and continued with a struggling smile: "We must remember—must we not—that we have been young ourselves, and try not to be too hard on little eccentricities!"

Mrs Ramsden spoke with feeling, for memory, though slumbering, was not dead. She had not always been a well-conducted widow lady, who expressed herself with decorum, and wore black cashmere and bugles. Thirty odd years ago she had been a plump little girl, with a lively capacity for mischief.

On one occasion she had danced two-thirds of the programme at a ball with an officer even more dashing than the objectionable nephew of Mrs Mott, and in a corner of the conservatory had given him a flower from her bouquet. He had kissed the flower before pressing it in his pocket-book, and had looked as if he would have liked to kiss something else into the bargain. ... After twenty-five years of life at Norton, it was astonishing how vividly the prim little widow recalled the guilty thrill of that moment! On yet another occasion she had carried on a clandestine correspondence with the brother of a friend, and had awakened to tardy pangs of conscience only when a more attractive suitor came upon the scene!

Mrs Ramsden blushed at the remembrance, and felt a kindly softening of the heart towards the absent Cornelia but Miss Briskett remained coldly unmoved. She had been an old maid in her cradle, and had gone on steadily growing old maidier ever since. Never had she so forgotten herself as to dally with the affections of any young man, which was perhaps the less to her credit, as no young man had exhibited any inclination to tempt her from the paths of single blessedness.

She looked down her nose at her friend's remark, and replied that she trusted she might be enabled to do her duty, without either prejudice or indulgence, and soon afterwards Mrs Ramsden took her leave, and returned to her own domain.

At one of the windows of the over-furnished sitting-room of The Holt, a girl was standing gazing dreamily through the spotted net curtains, with a weary little droop in the lines of the figure which bespoke fatigue, rather mental, than physical. She was badly dressed, in an ill-cut skirt, and an ill-cut blouse, and masses of light brown hair were twisted heavily together at the back of her head; but the face, which she turned to welcome her mother reminded one instinctively of a bunch of flowers—of white, smooth-leaved narcissi; of fragrant pink roses; of pansies—deep, purple-blue pansies, soft as velvet. Given the right circumstances and accessories, this might have been a beauty, an historical beauty, whose name would be handed down from one generation to another; a Georgina of Devonshire, a beautiful Miss Gunning, a witching Nell Gwynne; but alas! beauty is by no means independent of external aid! The poets who declaim to the contrary are men, poor things, who know no better; every woman in the world will plump for a good dressmaker, when she wishes to appear at her best.

Elma Ramsden, with the makings of a beauty, was just a pretty, dowdy girl, at whom a passer-by would hardly cast a second glance. She looked bored too, and a trifle discontented, and her voice had a flat, uninterested tone.

"Well, mother, back again! Have you enjoyed your call?"

"Thank you, dear, it was hardly a case of enjoyment. I was invited to give my opinion of a matter of importance."

"Yes, I know!—Should she have the sweep this week, or the week after next?—Should she have new covers for the drawing-room?—Would you advise slate-grey, or grey-slate for the new dress? ... I hope you brought the weight of your intellect to bear on the great problems, and solved them to your mutual satisfaction!"

Mrs Ramsden seated herself on a deeply-cushioned arm-chair, and began pulling off her tight kid gloves. A touch of offence was visible in her demeanour, and the feather in the front of her bonnet reared itself at an aggressive angle.

"It is not in good taste, my dear, to talk in that tone to your mother. Matters of domestic interest may not appeal to you in your present irresponsible position, but they are not without their own importance. The subject of to-day's discussion, however, was something quite different. You will be interested to hear that Miss Briskett is expecting a young American niece to pay her a visit at an early date."

"How young?" inquired Elma, tentatively. Her mother had a habit of alluding to "girls" of thirty-five, which did not commend itself to her youthful judgment. She reserved her interest until assured on this important point.

"About your own age or slightly younger. The only daughter of Mr Edward Briskett, the head of the family. His business takes him away from home for several months, and his daughter is anxious to avail herself of the opportunity of visiting her aunt."

"Oh!" said Elma; no more and no less, but as she turned her pansy-like eyes once more to the window, she grimaced expressively. She was sorry for the delusion of the American daughter who was willing to cross a whole ocean for the privilege of beholding Miss Sophia Briskett!

"What is she like?" she asked presently. "Did you hear anything about her?"

Mrs Ramsden shook her head dolefully.

"I fear, dear—strictly between ourselves—that she is not precisely what we should call a *nice* girl! The tone of her letter was decidedly flippant. Miss Briskett is hoping much from your influence. You two girls will naturally come a good deal into contact, and I hope you will do your utmost to set her an example of ladylike demeanour."

Elma stared steadily through the window. "*Flippant*!" she repeated to herself in a breathless whisper. "*Flippant!*" The pansy eyes widened. She heaved a sigh of deep, incredulous delight.

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### Chapter Three.

The *Lucania* was due to arrive in the Mersey early on a Tuesday forenoon, and Miss Briskett expected to welcome her niece on the evening of the same day. The best spare room was already swept and garnished, and nothing remained but to take counsel with Heap the cook, and draw out a menu of a dinner which could most successfully combat the strain of waiting. The spinster's own appetite, though sparse, was fastidious, and Heap was a mistress of her art, so that between the two a dainty little meal was arranged, while Mason, not to be outdone, endeavoured to impart an extra polish to her already highly-burnished silver. In the seclusion of the pantry she hummed a joyful air. "Praise the pigs! we shall have something young in the house, at last," said she to herself. "I don't mind the extra work, if she'll only make a bit of a stir!"

By six o'clock the dinner-table was laid, and Miss Briskett was sitting in state, clad in her newest grey silk gown, though a reference to Bradshaw made it seem improbable that the traveller could arrive before seven o'clock. At half-past six hot water was carried up to the bedroom; ten minutes later Miss Briskett left her seat to move another few yards nearer the window. Streaks of colour showed in her cheeks, her fingers clasped and unclasped in nervous fashion. She was conscious of a quick thud-thud at the left side of the thickly-boned bodice, and realised with surprise that it came from that almost forgotten organ, her heart. She had never experienced this agitation before when awaiting the arrival of her own friends. The old adage was right after all—blood was thicker than water! What would the child be like? Edward was a big fair man, with no special beauty of feature. Sybil had been slight and dainty. It did not seem likely that Cornelia would be specially pretty, her aunt prayed above all things that she was unnoticeable—to be unnoticeable was regarded as the climax of elegance in Norton society!—then with a sudden softening of expression found herself hoping that there would be something of Edward in looks or manner! She was a lonely woman, living apart from her kin. To have someone of her own would be a new and delightful experience. She felt glad, actually *glad* that Cornelia was coming!

Seven o'clock! At any moment now a cab might appear bearing the expected guest from the station. Miss Briskett crossed the room to alter the arrangement of a vase of flowers, and as she did so, the door opened, and Mason entered carrying a telegram upon a silver salver. Miss Briskett tore it open, and read the following message:—

"Safe and sound. Staying night in London with friends. Sight-seeing to-morrow morning. Be with you at five. God save the Queen!—Cornelia."

Miss Briskett's lips tightened. She folded the orange-coloured paper and returned it to its envelope, cleared her throat and said coldly—

"Inform Heap that my niece will not arrive until to-morrow evening, and be good enough to serve dinner at once."

Mason's face clouded with disappointment. In the kitchen Heap banged the saucepan-lids, and wanted to know what was the use of doing your best in a despicable world where you never got nothing for your pains! Mary repaired dolefully upstairs to take away the hot water, and shroud the furniture in dust-sheets; even the tweeny felt a sudden dampening of spirits, while in the dining-room the mistress of her house sat at her solitary meal with anger smouldering in her heart!

A delay to the boat would, of course, have been inevitable; if Cornelia had been so fatigued that she felt it necessary to break her journey half-way, that would have been a disappointment pure and simple, but that the girl had *chosen* to delay her arrival for her own amusement and gratification, this was an offence indeed—a want of respect and consideration well-nigh unforgivable. Staying in town with friends!—Staying *where?*—With what friends? Doing the sights to-morrow morning! Miss Briskett's lip curled in disdain. Then that ridiculous ending! What would Miss Brewster, the telegraph clerk at the post-office, think of such frivolity! In this tiny township, everyone was as well acquainted with their neighbour's business as with their own, and while Emily Brewster at the post-office was keenly interested in the advent of the American visitor, Miss Briskett, in her turn, knew all about Emily's parentage and education, the nature and peculiarities of the diseases which she had enjoyed, and vouchsafed a patronising interest in her prospects. It was gall and wormwood to feel sure that Emily had laughed and made merry over a message addressed to a Briskett, from a member of her own house!

Everyone has experienced the flatness which ensues when an expected excitement is postponed at the last moment, leaving the hours to drag along a slow, uneventful course. It was long since Miss Briskett had felt so consciously lonely and depressed as at her solitary dinner that evening. In the drawing-room, even Patience lost its wonted charm, and she was thankful when the time arrived to sip her tumbler of hot water, and retire to bed.

Next day it seemed somewhat flat to make the same preparations a second time over, but as no contradictory message had been received, it did not appear possible that a second disappointment could supervene. The tea-table was set out with special care, and a supply of home-made cakes placed on the three-storied brass stand. Once more Miss Briskett donned her best gown, and sat gazing through the lace window curtains.

At last! A cab drove up to the gate; two cabs, laden with enough luggage for a family journeying to the seaside. The door of the first was thrown open and there jumped out—a *man!* a tall, alert young man clad in a suit of light-checked tweed, who turned and gave his hand to a girl in blue serge, carefully assisting her to alight. They sauntered up the path together, laughing and chattering in leisurely enjoyment; half-way to the house the girl turned round, and stood for a moment to stare at the view, pointing, as she did so, in frank, unabashed fashion. Then they approached the door, held hospitably open in Mason's hand.

"Why, Aunt Soph, is that you?" cried a high, clear voice, with a pronounced American accent, which rang strangely in the unaccustomed ears. "This is me, anyhow, and I'm real glad to see you. I've had a lovely ride! This is Mr Eustace C Ross, who crossed with us in the *Lucania*. He's brought me right here in case I got lost, or fell over the edge. England's sweet! I've been all over London this morning, and we did a theatre last night. ... Aunt Soph, you have a look of father about the nose! Makes me feel kinder homesick to see your nose. I'm going to kiss it right away?"

And kiss it she did, on its thin, chilly tip, with Mason sniggering with delight in the background, and the strange young man chuckling in the foreground. Miss Briskett retreated hastily into the drawing-room, and her niece followed, casting curious glances to right and to left.

"You've got a real cosy little house, Aunt Soph. It looks real English—not a mite like our place at home. Is that tea? I'm just about dying for a cup of tea, and so's Mr Ross. Don't you want a cup of tea more than anything in the world, Mr Ross? I see you do by the way you look!"

She sank into an easy chair, and flashed a mischievous glance at the young man by her side. He was a tall, well-built young fellow, with the square shoulders and aggressive chin which to the English eye are the leading characteristics of American men. He had the air of being exceedingly well able to look after himself, but even his self-possession wavered before the frosty nature of his reception. He stood irresolutely, hat in hand, waiting for a repetition of Cornelia's invitation, but none came, and with an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, he resigned himself to the inevitable, and announced that it was imperative that he should hasten back to the station to catch a return train to town. He proceeded, therefore, to take leave of his travelling companion, a proceeding characterised on his side by transparent regret, on hers by an equally transparent indifference.

"You'll be sure to let me know when you come home!"

"Yes, indeed! I'll write when I start, and you shall come down to meet the boat. Good-bye! You've been real kind! I'm ever so much obliged!"

"Oh, I've enjoyed it enormously. You must be sure to let me know if there is anything I can do—at any time—anywhere!" repeated the young fellow, ardently.

He bowed to Miss Briskett, who extended her hand in patronising farewell, accompanying him to the door of the room, less, it appeared, from motives of kindness, than to satisfy herself that he had really departed.

On her return she found that her niece had taken off her hat, and was leaning back in her chair, sticking hat-pins through the crown with smiling complacency. Miss Briskett surveyed her with not unnatural curiosity, and came to the swift conclusion that she was not at all pretty, but most objectionably remarkable in appearance. The sort of girl whom people would stare at in the street; the sort of girl whom Norton would emphatically disapprove! Her hair in itself was arresting. Miss Briskett had never seen such hair. It was not red, it was not gold, it was not brown; but rather a blending of all three colours. It was, moreover, extraordinarily thick, and stood out from the head in a crisp

mass, rippling into big natural waves, while behind each ear was a broad streak of a lighter shade, almost flaxen in colour. No artificial means could have produced such an effect; it was obviously the work of nature. "American nature!" Miss Briskett told herself with a sniff. A respectably brought-up English girl could never have possessed such a head! Underneath this glorious mass of hair was a pale, little face, lighted up by a pair of golden-brown eyes. The eyebrows were well-marked and remarkably flexible; the nose was thin and pointed, a youthful replica of Miss Briskett's own. The only really good feature was the mouth, and that was adorable, with coral red lips curling up at the corners; tempting, kissable lips, made for love and laughter. For the rest, it was difficult to understand how a plain blue serge gown could possibly contrive to look so smart, or how those tiniest of tiny brown boots had managed to keep so dazzlingly free from dust throughout a railway journey.

Miss Briskett sat herself down by the tea-table, and cleared her throat ominously. Her niece had not been ten minutes in the house, yet already an occasion had arisen for a serious rebuke.

"Are you engaged to that young man, may I ask, Cornelia?"

Cornelia gave a little jump upon her seat, and opened her golden eyes in a stare of amazement.

"Mussy, no! What in the land put such an idea in your head?"

"Your tone and manner, my dear, and the fact of his accompanying you all the way from town. It is not usual for young men to put themselves to so much trouble for a mere acquaintance."

"He don't think it a trouble. He loves flying around! He's a sweet thing," said Miss Cornelia, with smiling recollection, "but he's not my Chubb! I'm sorry he couldn't stay to tea, for he's real amusing when he once gets started. He'd have made you screech with laughter."

Miss Briskett looked down her nose, in her most dignified and rebuking fashion.

"I am not accustomed to 'screech' about anything, and in this country, my dear, it is not considered convenable for young girls to accept the escort of a gentleman to whom they are not engaged. No English girl would think of doing such a thing!"

"They must have a middling dull time of it," retorted Cornelia, calmly, "I must teach them a thing or two while I'm over." She rose to take the teacup from her aunt's hand, and to help herself to a couple of sandwiches from a dainty heart-shaped dish. "Well—aren't you pleased to have me, Aunt Soph? I've wanted years to come over and see you. It seemed too bad that I knew none of Poppar's people. And now I'm here!" She wheeled round, teacup in hand, staring curiously around the handsome, over-furnished room; at the big ebony console table, ornamented with bunches of fruit manufactured out of coloured pebbles; at the grand piano in its walnut case; the piano which was never opened, but which served as a stand for innumerable photographs and ornaments; at the old-fashioned sofas and chairs in their glazey chintz covers; at the glass-shaded vases on the marble mantelshelf. "I'm here, and it's too quaint for words! Everything's—*different!* I suppose England *is* different, isn't it, Aunt Soph?"

"Very different!" Miss Briskett's tones fairly bubbled with innuendoes. She put down her rolled slice of bread and butter, and added frostily, "Before we go any further, Cornelia, I must really beg you to address me by my proper name. My name is Sophia. You have no intention of being disrespectful, I feel sure, but I am not accustomed to abbreviations. I have never had a nickname in my life, and I have no wish to begin at this late date."

"My! you poor sufferer, how lonesome for you! Nicknames are so homely and cosy. I have about as many as I have toes. One of my friends calls me 'Corney.' He's a bit of a wag—('He,' indeed!)—Another one calls me 'Nelia,'—'Neelya!'" She threw a lingering sentiment into the repetition, and chuckled reminiscently. "To most of my chums I'm just 'Neely.' Life's too short for three syllables every day of the week!"

"Over here in England we are not too hurried to address people in a proper manner. I shall call you by your full name, and expect you to do the same by me."

"All right, Aunt Sophia Ann, just as you please," cried Cornelia, naughtily. She was standing up, cup in hand, but even as she spoke she subsided on to a footstool by Miss Briskett's side, with a sudden lithe collapse of the body, which made that good lady gasp in dismay. She had never seen anybody but a professional acrobat move so quickly or unexpectedly, and felt convinced that the tea must have been spilt, and crumbs scattered wholesale over the carpet. But no! not even a drop had fallen into the saucer, and there sat Cornelia nibbling at an undamaged sandwich with little, strong, white teeth, as cool and composed as if such feats were of everyday occurrence.

"This is how I sit by Poppar at home; it's more sociable than right across the room. Poppar and I are just the greatest chums, and I hate it when he's away. There was a real nice woman wanted to come and keep house, and take me around—Mrs Van Dusen, widow of Henry P Van Dusen, who made a boom in cheese. Maybe you've heard of him. He made a pile, and lost it all, trying to do it again. Then he got tired of himself and took the *grippe* and died, and it was pretty dull for Mrs Van. She visits round, and puts in her time the best way she can. She'd have liked quite well to settle down at our place for three or four months, and I'd have liked it too, if it hadn't been for you. I wanted to see you Aunt Soph—ia Ann!"

She put up a thin little hand, and rubbed it ingratiatingly up and down the shiny silk lap, to the stupefaction of Mason, who came in at that moment bearing a plate of hot scones, and retired to give a faithful rendering of the position to her allies in the kitchen, sitting down on the fender stool, and stroking the cook's apron in dramatic imitation, while that good lady and her satellites went into helpless fits of laughter.

"I'd as soon stroke a nettle myself," said the cook, "but there's no accounting for taste! You take my word for it, if she goes on stroking much longer, she'll get a sting as she won't forget in a hurry!"



Upstairs in the drawing-room, Miss Briskett's fidgeting uncomfortably beneath that caressing hand. In her lonely, self-contained life, she was so unused to demonstrations of the kind that she was at a loss how to receive them when they came. Instinctively she drew herself away, shrinking into the corners of her chair and busying herself with the re-arrangement of the tray, while Cornelia asked one question after another in her high-pitched, slightly monotonous voice.

"It's mighty quiet out here, Aunt Soph—ia Ann! Does it always go on being just as still? Do you live all the year round, right here in this house by your lonesome, listening to the grass growing across the lane? What do you *do*, anyway? That's a real smart-looking maid! Will she be the one to wait upon me? Most all my shirt waists fasten up the back, and there's got to be someone round to fix them, or I'm all undone. I guess you're pretty tidy by the looks of you, Aunt Soph. I can't see after things myself, but I fidget the life out of everybody if I'm not just so. I've got the sweetest clothes.—Do you have gay times over here in Norton? Is there a good deal of young society? I love prancing round and having a good time. Poppar says the boys spoil me; there's always a crowd of them hanging round, ready to do everything I want, and to send me flowers and bon-bons. I'm just crazed on bonbons! My state-room was piled full of bouquets and chocolates coming over. I had more than any other girl on board!"

Miss Briskett's lips tightened ominously. "If by 'boys' you mean young men, Cornelia, I am surprised that your father allows you to receive indiscriminate gifts from strangers. I fear he has become a thorough American, and forgotten his early training. In England no young man would venture to send a gift to a lady to whom he was not either related, or engaged to be married."

"My! how mean! American men are for ever sending things, and the girls just love to have them do it. Seems to me, Aunt Soph, it's about time I came over to teach you how to do things in this benighted isle! Poppar says you're all pretty mouldy, but, short of an earthquake, he can't think of anything better calculated to shake you up, than a good spell of me waltzing around. I guess he's about right. I'm never quiet unless I'm sick. There's not much of the Sleeping Beauty about Cornelia E Briskett!"

Miss Briskett sat still, a pillar of outraged propriety. This was worse than anything she had expected! The girl appeared to have no modesty, no decorum, no sense of shame. She might straighten her back until it was as stiff as a poker, might arch her brows into semicircles, and purse her lips into an expression of disapproval which would have frightened Elma Ramsden out of her senses, but Cornelia never appeared to notice that anything was amiss, and continued her meal with bland enjoyment. When she had finished the sandwiches she rested her left arm more firmly on her aunt's knee, and raised her pointed chin until it rested, actually rested, upon the edge of the table, the while she carefully scrutinised the different varieties of cake, and selected the piece most to her taste. At this she proceeded to nibble with evident satisfaction, lifting it to her lips in one thin hand, while the other still rested caressingly on that shiny silk lap. Miss Briskett's dumb swellings of anger gradually subsided to the point when it became possible to put them into words. She cleared her throat with the usual preliminary grunt, whereupon the girl turned her stag-like head, to gaze questioningly upwards, her expression sweetly alert, her eyes—limpid, golden eyes—widely opened between the double line of lashes!

Miss Briskett looked, and the remonstrance died on her lips. The scene shifted, and in an instant she had travelled back through the years to a day long, long ago, when she sat, a girl in her teens, talking to the little boy brother who was the dearest of all created things, telling him stories, and watching the wonder in his eyes! Pert, self-sufficient, and presumptuous as she might be, by some contradictory freak of nature, that divine innocence still lingered in this young girl's eyes. The sight of it arrested the words on the spinster's lips. She realised with shame that almost every word which she had spoken to the girl since her arrival had been tinged with reproof, and blushed for her own lack of hospitality. The frown faded, and was replaced by a struggling smile. With a half-strained movement she advanced a chilly hand to meet the girl's warm grasp.

Cornelia drew a long, fluttering sigh; a sigh of utter contentment, and laid her russet head on the folds of the stiff grey silk.

"Oh, Aunt Soph—ia! you are just as sweet!" she murmured beneath her breath.

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## Chapter Four.

Perfect health, radiant spirits, supreme self-confidence, a sweetly smiling determination to have her own way, and go her own course, though the skies fell, and all creation conspired to prevent her—these were the characteristics of Miss Cornelia Briskett most apparent on a superficial acquaintance. On the morning after her arrival, when Mary the housemaid carried the cup of early morning tea to her bedside, she found the young lady leaning back against the pillows, enveloped in a garment which suggested a garden party, rather than a night-gown, wide awake, and ready for conversation. Really a most affable young lady, who instead of vouchsafing a cool good-morning, launched out into quite a confidential talk, inquiring after the different members of Mary's family, their names, ages, and occupations, and showing a most sympathetic interest in the girl's own future.

"I guess you are going to be married pretty soon! You've got a marrying face!" she said shrewdly, whereupon Mary, blushing, acknowledged that she *had* a friend, and that he *did* speak of early next spring.

"Told you so!" cried Cornelia, dimpling. "Well, Mury, see here, you nip round and wait upon me the best you know, and I'll give you an elegant present! I wear muslins most all the time in summer, and I can't endoor to have them mused. You keep carrying them away and ironing them out nice and smooth, without bothering me to tell you. See! I need lots of attention; there's no getting away from that, but I'll make it worth your while. You just put your mind to it, and I guess you'll make a tip-top maid!"

Mary was at least prepared to perish in the attempt. She related the conversation downstairs, with the natural result

that each of the other three maids registered a vow to be second to none in her attentions to the young visitor.

The breakfast-gong rang at eight o'clock, but it was a good ten minutes later before Cornelia came sauntering downstairs, singing an unknown ditty at the pitch of a sweet, if somewhat nasal voice. She was dressed in white of the most elaborate simplicity, and her shaded hair looked even more crisply conspicuous than on the night before. The last line of the song did not come to an end until she was half-way across the dining-room floor, and so far from being dismayed by her aunt's stare of disapproval, she only laughed, waved her hands, and threw an extra flourish into the *rallentando*. Then she swooped down upon the stiff figure, hugged it affectionately, and planted three kisses on the cold, grey face; one on the lips, one on the brow, a third—deliberately—on the tip of the nose.

"Cornelia, please! Recollect yourself, my dear! Have a little respect. You must never do that again!" cried Miss Briskett, irritably, but the girl showed not the faintest sign of being awed.

"It's the nose of my father, and I've just *got* to kiss it! It's not a mite of use promising that I won't. I've got to kiss it regularly every morning, and every night, until he comes over to be kissed himself!" she announced calmly, seating herself at the opposite side of the square dining-table, and peering curiously at the various dishes. "Poppar says you never have anything for breakfast in England but bacon and eggs, but I don't see any here. What's under this cover?—Fish?"

"If you wait a few minutes your bacon will be brought in. It had grown cold with waiting so long, so I sent it away to be kept hot. The breakfast hour is eight; not a quarter past."

"It's not a mite of use telling me the hours. I'm always late! I don't suppose I've ever been down in time in my life, unless by a mistake," returned Cornelia, cheerfully. "I like to stay in bed and let the day get sorter warmed up and comfortable, before I begin. What makes you want to get up so early, anyway? I should have thought nine would have been heaps early enough, when you have nothing to do."

It was not a promising beginning to the day. In her own household Miss Briskett was accustomed to an authority as complete as that of the general of an army. She was just, and she was generous; her servants were treated with kindness and consideration, but if they wished to retain their places, they had to learn the lesson of dumb, unquestioning obedience. She might be right, she might be wrong, she might remember, she might forget—no matter! it was not their business to enlighten her. "Theirs but to do, and die!" She would not brook a question as to her own authority. It was, therefore, a distinct blow to the good lady to find her decrees ignored by her young guest with a smiling good-nature, more baffling than the most determined opposition.

She remained stolidly silent throughout the meal, but Cornelia apparently regarded his attitude as a tactful abdication in her own favour, and kept up an incessant flow of conversation from start to finish. When the bell was rung for prayers, she seated herself in a low chair, directly facing the servants' seats, and smiled a dazzling greeting to each in turn. They sat down in their usual positions, heads bent, hands folded on the middle of their clean white aprons; feet tucked carefully out of sight; there was no outward sign of irreverence or inattention in their demeanour, but Miss Briskett *felt*, that every single woman of them was absorbed—utterly, consumedly absorbed—in casting sly glances at that distracting white vision in the easy chair; at the dully glowing hair, the floating folds of white, the tiny, extended feet. She might have read a page of the dictionary, and they would not have noticed; even Heap, who was old enough to know better, was edging sideways in her chair, to get a better view!

When the four stiffly-starched dresses had rustled out of the room, Cornelia yawned, and stretched herself like a sleepy, luxurious kitten, then snoodled down once more in her comfortable chair. Her eyes were fixed upon her aunt's face, while that good lady bustled about the room, folding the newspaper into an accurate square, and putting it away in a brass-bound cage; collecting scattered envelopes and putting them in the waste-paper basket, moving the flower-vases on the chimney-piece, so that they should stand at mathematically the same distance from the central clock. At every movement she waited to hear the expected, "Can I help you, Aunt Sophia?" which right feeling would surely prompt in any well-principled damsel, and though her reply would of a certainty have been in the negative, she felt aggrieved that the opportunity was not vouchsafed.

She was determined not to look in the girl's direction, nor to meet those watching eyes, but presently, in spite of herself, she felt a magnetic compulsion to turn her head to answer the bright, expectant glance.

"Well?" queried Cornelia, smiling.

"Well what, my dear?"

"How are you going to amuse me this forenoon?"

Miss Briskett sat down suddenly in the nearest chair, and suffered a mental collapse. Positively this view of the situation had never once dawned upon her unimaginative brain! Mrs Ramsden had dimly wrestled with the problem, solving it at last with an easy, "She can talk to Elma!" but the aunt and hostess had been too much occupied with consideration for her own comfort to think of anyone else. It had crossed her mind that the girl might tire her, bore her, worry her, or humiliate her before the neighbours; in an occasional giddy flight of fancy she had even supposed it possible that Cornelia might amuse her, and make life more agreeable, but never for the fraction of a second had she realised that she herself was fated either to bore, or to amuse Cornelia in return!

The discovery was a shock. Being a just woman, Miss Briskett was forced to the conclusion that she had been selfish and self-engrossed; but such self-revelations do not as a rule soften our hearts towards the fellow-creature who has been the means of our enlightenment. Miss Briskett was annoyed with herself, but she was much more annoyed with Cornelia, and considered that she had good reason to be so.

"I have no time to think of frivolities in the morning, my dear. I am too busy with household duties. I am now going to

the kitchen to interview my cook, then to the store-room to give out what is needed for the day, and when that is accomplished I shall go to the shops to give my orders. If you wish, I shall be pleased to have your company!"

"Right oh!" cried Cornelia, nodding. "It will be a lesson in your silly old pounds and pence. What do you keep in your store-room, Aunt Soph? Nice things? Fruits? Candy? Cake? I wouldn't mind giving out the stores for a spell, now and again. Well! ... I'll just mouch round, and be ready for you when you set out for your walk."

Miss Briskett left the room, in blissful ignorance of what "mouch" might mean, and much too dignified to inquire, but by the time that ten o'clock had struck, she had learnt to connect the expression with all that was irritating and presumptuous. In the midst of her discussion with the cook, for instance, the sound of music burst upon her ears; the echo of that disused piano which had almost forgotten to be anything but a stand for ornaments and lamps. Bang went the bass, crash went the treble, the tune a well-known dance, played with a dash and a spirt, a rollicking marking of time irresistible to any human creature under forty, who did not suffer from corns on their toes. In the recesses of the scullery a subdued scuffling was heard. Tweeny was stepping it to and fro, saucepans in hand; from the dining-room overhead, where Mason was clearing away the breakfast dishes, came a succession of mysterious bumping sounds. Heap stood stolid as a rock, but her eyes—her small, pale, querulous eyes—danced a deliberate waltz round the table and back...

"I must request Cornelia not to play the piano in the morning!" said Miss Briskett to herself.

From the store-room upstairs a sound of talking and laughing was heard from within the visitor's bedroom, where sat that young lady in state, issuing orders to Mary, who was blissfully employed in unpacking the contents of one of the big dress boxes, and hanging up skirts in the mahogany wardrobe.

"I must beg Cornelia not to interfere with the servants' work in the morning!" said Miss Briskett once more. At half-past ten silence reigned, and she went downstairs, equipped in her black silk mantle and her third best bonnet, to announce her readiness to start on the usual morning round.

Cornelia was not in the morning-room; she was not in the drawing-room, though abundant signs of her recent presence were visible in the littered ornaments on the open piano.

"I must beg Cornelia to put things back in their proper places!" said Miss Briskett a third time as she crossed the hall to the dining-room. This room also was empty, but even as she grasped the fact, Miss Briskett started with dismay to behold a bareheaded figure leaning over the garden gate, elbows propped on the topmost bar, and chin supported on clasped hands. This time she did not pause to determine what commands she should issue in the future, but stepped hastily down the path to take immediate and peremptory measures.

"My dear! in the front garden—without a hat—leaning over the gate! What can you be thinking of? The neighbours might see you!"

Cornelia turned in lazy amusement. "Well, if it's going to be a shock to them, they might as well begin early, and get it over." She ran a surprised eye over her aunt's severe attire. "My, Aunt Soph, you look too good to live! I'm 'most frightened of you in that bonnet. If you'd given a hoot from the window I'd have hustled up, and not kept you waiting. Just hang on two shakes while I get my hat. I won't stay to prink!"

"I am not accustomed—" began Miss Briskett, automatically, but she spoke to thin air. Cornelia had flown up the path in a cloud of swirling skirts; cries of "Mury! Mury!" sounded from within, and the mistress of the house slowly retraced her steps and seated herself to await the next appearance of the whirlwind with what patience she could command.

It was long in coming. The clock ticked a slow quarter of an hour, and was approaching twenty minutes, when footsteps sounded once more, and Cornelia appeared in the doorway. She had not changed her dress, she had not donned her jacket; her long, white gloves dangled from her hand; to judge from appearances she had spent a solid twenty minutes in putting on a tip-tilted hat which had been trimmed with bows of dainty flowered ribbon, on the principle of the more the merrier. Miss Briskett disapproved of the hat. It dipped over the forehead, giving an obviously artificial air of demureness to the features; it tilted up at the back, revealing the objectionable hair in all its wanton profusion. It looked—*odd*, and if there was one thing more than another to which Norton objected, it was a garment which differentiated itself from its fellows.

Aunt and niece walked down the path together in the direction of the South Lodge, the latter putting innumerable questions, to which the former replied in shocked surprise. "What were those gardens across the road?"—They were private property of householders in the Park.—"Did they have fine jinks over there in summer time?"—The householders in the park never, under any circumstances, indulged in "jinks." They disapproved thoroughly, and on principle, of anything connected with jinks!—"Think of that now—the poor, deluded creatures! What did they use the gardens for, anyway?"—The gardens were used for an occasional promenade; and were also valuable as forming a screen between the Park and the houses on the Western Road.—"What was wrong with the houses on the Western Road?"—There was nothing wrong with the houses in question. The residents in the Park objected to see, or to be seen by, *any* houses, however desirable. They wished to ensure for themselves an unbroken and uninterrupted privacy.—"My gracious!"

Mrs Phipps, the dragon of the South Lodge, came out to the doorstep, and bobbed respectfully as Miss Briskett passed by, but curiosity was rampant upon her features. Cornelia smiled radiantly upon her; she smiled upon everyone she met, and threw bright, curious glances to right and to left.

"My! isn't it *green*? My! isn't it still? Where *is* everyone, anyway? Have they got a funeral in every house? Seems kind of unsociable, muffling themselves up behind these hedgerows! Over with us, if we've got a good thing, we're not so eager to hide it away. You can walk along the sidewalk and see everything that's going on. In the towns the families camp out on the doorsteps. It's real lively and sociable. ... Are these your stores? They look as if they'd been made in

the year one.”

They were, in truth, a quaint little row—butcher, grocer, greengrocer, and linen-draper, all nestled into a little angle between two long, outstanding buildings, which seemed threatening at every moment to fall down and crush them to atoms. The windows were small, and the space inside decidedly limited, and this morning there was an unusual rush of customers. It seemed as if every housewife in the neighbourhood had sallied forth to make her purchases at the exact hour when Miss Briskett was known to do her daily shopping. At the grocer’s counter Cornelia was introduced to Mrs Beaumont, of The Croft.

“My niece, Miss Cornelia Briskett. Mrs Beaumont,” murmured Miss Briskett.

“Mrs Beaumont!” repeated Cornelia, loudly, with a gracious, sidelong observance, at which unusual manner of receiving an introduction both ladies stared in surprise.

Presently Mrs Beaumont recovered herself sufficiently to put an all-important question.

“How do you like England?”

“I think it’s lovely,” said Cornelia.

In the fishmonger’s shop Mrs Rhodes and Mrs Muir came up in their turn, and opened wide eyes of surprise as the strange girl again repeated their names in her high monotone. Evidently this was an American custom. Strange people, the Americans! The ladies simpered, and put the inevitable query: “How do you like England?”

“I think it’s sweet,” said Cornelia.

The draper’s shop was a revelation of old-world methods. One anaemic-looking assistant endeavoured to attend to three counters and half a dozen customers, with an unruffled calm which they vainly strove to emulate. Miss Briskett produced a pattern of grey ribbon which she wished to match. Four different boxes were lifted down from the wall, and their contents ransacked in vain, while the patient waiters received small sops in the shape of cases and trays, shoved along to their corner of the counter. When persuasion failed to convince Miss Briskett that an elephant grey exactly matched her silvery fragment—“I’ll see if we have it in stock!” cried the damsel, hopefully, and promptly disappeared into space. The minutes passed by; Cornelia frowned and fidgeted, was introduced to a fourth dame, and declared that England was “cute.” Weary waiters for flannel and small-wares looked at their watches, and fidgeted restlessly, but no one rebelled, nor showed any inclination to walk out of the shop in disgust. At length the assistant reappeared, flushed and panting, to regret that they were “sold out,” and “What is your next pleasure, madam?”

Madam’s next pleasure was a skein of wool, which investigation again failed to produce. “But we have a very nice line in kid gloves; can I show you something in that line this morning?” Miss Briskett refused to be tempted, and produced a coin from her purse in payment of a small account. Cornelia was interested to be introduced to “hef-a-crown,” and tried to calculate what would be left after the subtraction of a mysterious “seven-three.” She had abundant time to calculate, for, to the suspicious mind, it might really appear as if the assistant had emigrated to foreign climes with the half-crown as capital in hand. The little shop was dull and stuffy; an odour of flannel filled the air; the faces of the patient waiters were colourless and depressed. Cornelia flounced on her seat, and curled her beautiful lips.

“My stars and stripes!” she cried aloud. “I’ll take root if I sit here much longer. Seems as that change won’t be ready till the last trump!”

She sprang from her chair as she spoke, too much absorbed in her own impatience to note the petrification of horror on the faces of the waiters at the counter, and in the doorway came face to face with a plump, dignified little lady, accompanied by a girl in navy blue.

“How do you do, my dear? I am Mrs Ramsden,” said the stoat lady, holding out her hand with a very pleasant friendliness. “As the niece of my dear friend and neighbour, allow me to give you a hearty welcome to our shores. This is my daughter, Elma, with whom I hope you will be great friends. I will leave you to talk together while I make my purchases. Young people always get on better alone!”

She smiled, a kind, motherly smile, nodding her head the while, until the upright feather quivered on its stem, then disappeared through the dingy portals, leaving the two girls on the narrow pavement staring at each other with bright, curious eyes.

“How—how do you like England?” queried Elma, shyly, and Cornelia answered with a happy laugh—

“I’ve been asked that question hef a dozen times already, and I only set foot on these shores day before yesterday. I think it seems a real good place for a nerve rest, but if you want to hustle!” She shrugged expressively, and Elma smiled with quick understanding.

“Ah, you have been shopping at Willcox’s! But Willcox’s is not England—Norton is not England; it’s just a sleepy little backwater, shut away from the great current of life. Don’t judge England by what you see here. You’d like the *real* England—you couldn’t help liking that!”

“I like *you*!” said Cornelia, bluntly. She held out her hand with a gesture of frank camaraderie, and Elma clasped it, thrilling with pleasure. A happy conviction assured her that she had found a friend after her own heart.

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## Chapter Five.

By the time that Cornelia had been a week in residence at The Nook, she had become the one absorbing topic of Norton conversation, and her aunt's attitude towards her was an odd mingling of shame and pride. On principle the spinster disapproved of almost everything that the girl did or said, and suffered every day a succession of electric shocks—but, as we all know, such shocks are guaranteed to exercise a bracing influence on the constitution, and Miss Briskett was conscious of feeling brighter and more alert than for many years past. She no longer reigned as monarch over all she surveyed. A Czar of Russia, suddenly confronted by a Duma of Radical principles and audacious energy, could not feel more proudly aggrieved and antagonistic, but it is conceivable that a Czar might cherish a secret affection for the leader of an opposition who showed himself honest, clever, and affectionate. In conclave with her own heart, Miss Briskett acknowledged that she cherished a distinct partiality for her niece, but in view of the said niece's tendency to conceit, the partiality was rigorously concealed.

As for Norton society, it welcomed Cornelia with open arms; that is to say, all the old ladies of Miss Briskett's acquaintance called upon her, inquired if she liked England, and sent their maids round the following day with neat little notes inviting aunt and niece to take tea on a certain afternoon at half-past four o'clock. These tea-drinkings soon became a daily occurrence, and Cornelia's attitude towards them was one of consecutive anticipation, amusement, and ennui. You dressed up in your best clothes; you sat in rows round a stuffy room; you drank stewed tea, and ate buttered cakes. You met every day the same—everlastingly the same ladies, dressed in the same garments, and listened every day to the same futile talk. From the older ladies, criticisms of last Sunday's sermon, and details of household grievances; from the younger, "*Have you seen Miss Horby's new hat? Did you hear the latest about the Briggs? ... I'm going to have blue, with lace insertions...*"

Cornelia bore it meekly for a week on end, and then she struck. Two notes were discovered lying upon the breakfast-table containing invitations to two more tea-parties. "So kind of them! You will like to go, won't you, my dear?" said Miss Briskett, pouring out coffee.

"No, I shan't, then!" answered Cornelia, ladling out bacon. Her curling lips were pressed together, her flexible eyebrows wrinkled towards the nose. If Edward B Briskett had been present he would have recognised signals of breakers ahead! "I guess I'm about full up of tea-parties. I'm not going to any more, this side Jordan!"

"Not going, my dear?" Miss Briskett choked with mingled amazement and dismay. "Why not, if you please? You have no other engagements. My friends pay you the honour of an invitation. It is my wish that you accept. You surely cannot mean what you are saying!"

She stared across the table in her most dignified and awe-inspiring fashion, but Cornelia refused to meet her eyes, devoting her entire attention to the consumption of her breakfast.

"You bet I do!"

"Cornelia, how often must I beg you not to use that exceedingly objectionable expression? I ask you a simple question; please answer it without exaggeration. Why do you object to accompany me to these two parties?"

"Because it's a waste of time. It's against my principles to have the same tooth drawn six times over. I know all I want to about tea-parties in England, and I'm ready to pass on to something fresh. I'd go clean crazed if I'd to sit through that performance again."

"I am sorry you have been so bored. I hoped you had enjoyed yourself," said Miss Briskett, stiffly, but with an underlying disappointment in her tone, which Cornelia was quick to recognise. The imps of temper and obstinacy which had peeped out of her golden eyes suddenly disappeared from view, and she nodded a cheery reassurance.

"I wasn't a mite bored at the start. I loved going round with you and seeing your friends, but I *have* seen them, and they've seen me, and we said all we want to, so that trick is played out. You can't go on drinking tea with the same old ladies all the days of your life? Why can't they hit on something fresh?"

Miss Briskett did not reply. She was indeed too much upset for words. Tea-drinking was the only form of dissipation in which she and her friends indulged, or had indulged for many years past. In more energetic days an occasional dinner had varied the monotony, but as time crept on there seemed a dozen reasons for dropping the more elaborate form of entertainment. A dinner-party upset the servants; it necessitated the resurrection of the best dinner-service from the china cupboard, and the best silver from the safe; it entailed late hours, a sense of responsibility, the exertion of entertaining. How much simpler to buy a sixpenny jar of cream and a few shillings worth of cake welcome your friends at half-past four, and be free at half-past five to lie down on the sofa, and have a nap before dressing for dinner!

Miss Briskett had counted on a protracted orgy of tea-parties in her niece's honour, and had already planned a return bout on her own accord, to set the ball rolling a second time. Her wildest flight of fancy had not soared beyond tea, and here was Cornelia showing signs of rebellion at the end of a fortnight! It said much for the impression which that young lady had made that there was a note of actual entreaty in the voice in which her aunt addressed her.

"I think you must reconsider your decision, Cornelia. I strongly wish you to accept these invitations, and my friends will be much disappointed if you refuse. When you understand the position, I feel sure you will put your own wishes on one side, and consent to do what is right and fitting."

But Miss Cornelia tossed her head, and the impish light flashed back into her golden eyes.

"I ken't break my word," she said bluntly. In moments of friction her American accent was even more strongly marked than usual, which fact was not calculated to soften her aunt's irritation, "Poppar had me taught to say a thing

and stick to it, no matter how I suffered. I've *said* I won't go, and I *won't*—not if all the old ladies in Christendom were to come and howl at the door! You ken tell 'em I've come out in spots, and you reckon I'm going down with small-pox."

"That would not be true."

"Oh, shucks!" shrugged Cornelia. "Troth is a fine institootion, but, like most old things, it gives out at times, and then there's nothing for it but to fall back upon good, new-fashioned imagination."

Miss Briskett rose majestically from her seat and left the room.

Cornelia lifted the remnant of bread which lay beside her plate, raised it high above her head, and deliberately pitched it to the end of the room. It hit against the wall, and fell over the carpet in a shower of crumbs. She chuckled malevolently, gave the table a vicious shove on one side, and rose in her turn.

On one of the tables by the window stood a neat little pile of books; she lifted the topmost, and thrusting it under her arm, marched deliberately down the garden path to the front gate, and thence across the road towards the gate leading into the plantation. It was a hot, sunny day, and half-way up the green knoll stood an oak tree, whose spreading branches made delightful dapplings of shade. Here also a gentle breeze rustled the leaves to and fro, while in the stuffy paths below the air itself seemed exhausted and bereft of life. Cornelia lifted her white skirts, with a display of slim brown ankles which would have scandalised the Norton worthies, stepped neatly and cleanly over the wire arches, and made a bee-line across the grass for the forbidden spot. She was in the mood when it seemed an absolute necessity to defy somebody, and even a printed notice was better than nothing. She seated herself aggressively in the most conspicuous position, on the side of the tree facing the houses, spread wide her skirts on either side, folded her arms, and awaited developments.

"I hope they'll *all* look out and see me sitting on their old grass! I hope they'll come over, and stand in *rows* on the path, telling me that nice young girls never sat on the grass in England. ... Then I'll tell 'em what I think. ... I'm just in the mood to do it. Seems as if I hadn't drawn a free breath for weeks. 'Cornelia, *don't!* Cornelia, *do!*' 'In this country we always—' 'In this country we never—' My stars and stripes; why did I leave my happy home?"

Round the corner of the path there came into view the figure of Morris, keeper of the South Lodge, sweeping the gravel path, his head bent over his task. Cornelia's naughty eyes sent out a flash of delight. She cleared her throat in a deliberate "hem," cleared it again, and coughed in conclusion. Morris leant on his broom, surveyed the landscape o'er, and visibly reeled at the sight of such barefaced trespassing. The broom was hoisted against a tree, while he himself mounted the sloping path, shading his eyes from the sun. At the first glance he had recognised the "'Merican young lady," whose doings and clothings—particularly clothings—had formed the unvarying theme of his wife's conversation for the last fortnight. He had committed himself so far as to say that he rather fancied the looks of her, but in the depths of his heart the feeling lingered that for a born lady she was a trifle "free." Morris was a survival of the old feudal type who "knew his place," and enjoyed being trampled under foot by his "betters." If an employer addressed him in terms of kindly consideration, his gratitude was tinged with contempt. These were not the manners of the good old gentry in whose service he had been trained!

Opposite the oak tree he came to a stand, and assumed his official manner.

"Beg pardon, miss; visitors his not permitted on the graws."

"For the land's sake, why not?"

"It's against the rules, miss."

"Suppose it is! What will happen if I break 'em?"

Morris looked discomfited, pushed his hat from his forehead, and murmured vaguely that he 'sposed she'd be punished.

"Who by? Who does the grass belong to, anyhow?"

"To yer Rant, miss, and the hother ladies and gentlemen that owns the park."

"Well, and what could *they* do?"

Morris, still vague and uncomfortable, murmured concerning prosecution.

"What's prosecution?" queried Cornelia. "Sounds exciting, anyway. Much more exciting than sitting on the gravel paths. Guess I'll stay where I am, and find out. You get on with your work, and keep calm, and when the fun begins you can waltz in, and play your part. It's no use *one* officer trying to arrest me, though! You'll need a *posse*, for I'll fight to the death! You might give them the tip!"

Morris walked down hill in stunned surprise, leaving Cornelia to chuckle to herself in restored good humour. Her impulses towards rebellion and repentance were alike swift and speedy, but between the two lay a span of licence, when she revelled in revolt, and felt the tingling of riotous success. Such a moment was the present as she watched Morris's dumb retreat, and cast her dancing eyes around, in search of the next victim.

For the moment no living creature was in sight, but the scene was sufficiently entrancing to justify the statement that there is no country in the world so charming as England on a fine June day.

It was hot, but not too hot to be exhausting; little fleecy white clouds flecked the blue dome overhead; the air was

sweet with the odour of flowering trees now in the height of their beauty. The gardener who had planted them had possessed a nice eye for colour, and much skill in gaining the desired effects. The golden rain of laburnum, and deep rich red of hawthorn, were thrown up against the dark lustre of copper-beech, or the misty green of a graceful fir tree; white and purple lilac were divided by a light pink thorn, and on the tall chestnuts the red and white blossoms shone like candles on a giant Christmas tree. It was the one, all-wonderful week, when everything seems in bloom at the same time; the week which presages the end of spring, more beautiful than summer, as promise is ever more perfect than fulfilment. Even the stiff crescent of houses looked picturesque, viewed through the softening screen of green. Cornelia scanned the row of upper windows with smiling curiosity. No one was visible; no one ever *was* visible at a window at Norton Park; but discreetly hidden by the lace curtains, half a dozen be-capped heads might even now be nodding in her direction.—“My dear, *what* is that white figure under the oak tree? I thought at first it must be a sheep, but it is evidently a female of some description. It looks exceedingly like—but it could not be, it could not *possibly* be, Miss Briskett’s niece!...”

Miss Briskett’s niece chuckled, and turned her head to look up the sloping path. Her choice of position had been largely decided by the fact that Elma Ramsden was due to return by this route from a weekly music lesson somewhere about the present time. In the course of the past week the two girls had drunk tea in the same houses every afternoon, and exchanged sympathetic glances across a phalanx of elderly ladies, but the chances for *tête-à-tête* conversations had been disappointingly few, and this morning Cornelia had a craving for a companion young enough to encourage her in her rebellion, or at least to understand the pent-up vitality which had brought it to a head.

She watched eagerly for the advent of the tall, blue-robed figure. Elma always wore dark blue cambric on ordinary occasions. “So useful!” said her mother, “and such a saving in the washing bill.” Mother and daughter ran up the plain breadths in the sewing machine, and the only fitting in the body was compassed by a draw-string at the waist. It did not seem a matter of moment to Mrs Ramsden whether the said string was an inch higher or lower, and Elma was economical in belts. Cornelia’s expression was eloquent as she viewed the outline of the English girl’s figure as she slowly approached down the narrow path. So far Elma had not noticed her presence. She was too much buried in her own dreams. Poor pretty thing! That was all that was left to her—to take it out in dreams. She had not yet begun to be awake!

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## Chapter Six.

Twenty yards farther Elma came to a halt, eyes and lips opened wide in gaping astonishment at the sight of the trespasser.

“Cornelia! You are sitting on the grass.”

“That’s so! Why shouldn’t I, if I’ve a mind?”

“It’s forbidden!”

“Oh, shucks!” cried Cornelia, impatiently. “Who by?”

Elma waved her hand vaguely towards the crescent of houses.

“Everybody—all of them! It’s a rule. They all agreed.”

“Suppose they did! I guess it would take more than ten old ladies to prevent me doing what I want. What’s the good of grass, anyway, if you can’t enjoy it? It’s lovely up here. I’m as cool as an otter. You look pretty warm after your walk. Step over, and come right here by me.” She patted the ground beside her, and smiled in her most irresistible fashion. “We’ll have the loveliest talk—”

Elma hesitated, fascinated but dismayed.

“I daren’t. It’s breaking the rules. What would they say?”

“That’s what we’ve got to find out. They can’t kill us, anyway, and we’ll have had a good time first. You’ve got to pay your bills in this wicked world. Now, then—hustle!”

“I can’t!” faltered Elma, and lifted one foot over the wire arch, “I daren’t!” and stepped completely over, lifting her skirt behind her. The deed was done! A tingle of excitement ran through her veins, she reared her head and laughed aloud, looking with bright, unashamed eyes at the curtained windows. The moment of revolt had come; a moment long desired in the depths of a meek, long-suffering heart, and prepared for by many a seething inward struggle. Cornelia had applied the match, and the tow blazed. Elma laughed again, and seated herself beneath the tree. Cornelia had tossed her hat on the ground and clasped her hands round her knees in comfortable, inelegant position. Elma did the same, and the American girl, watching her, was at a loss to account for the reckless radiance of her smile. The sunshine flickered down between the branches on the sweet pink and white face, the pansy blue eyes, and long slender throat; it shone alike on the ill-fitting gown, the clumsy shoes, the carelessly arranged hair. Cornelia’s golden eyes travelled up and down, down and up, in earnest, scrutinising fashion. She met Elma’s glance with a shake of the head, forbearing, yet reproachful.

“Say! You don’t know how to prink, do you?”

“Prink?” Elma was doubtful even as to the meaning of the word. She arched her brows in inquiry, whereat Cornelia laughed aloud.

"You are real, genuine English! You make me think of roses, and cream, and honey, and mountain dew, and everything that's sweet and wholesome, and takes no thought of the morrow. If you lived over with us, we'd fix you up so your own mother wouldn't know you, and there'd be paragraphs about you in the papers every single day, saying what you did, and what you were wearing, and how you looked when you wore it."

"Miss Elma Ramsden sat on the grass, attired in a blue rag, with freckles on her nose."

"My, no!" Cornelia chuckled. "They spread it pretty thick when they once begin. You'd have every adjective in the dictionary emptied over you. 'The irresistible Elma,' 'Radiant Miss Ramsden,' 'The beauteous English Rose.' Half the time it's only bluff, but with you it would be a true bill. You *are* beautiful. Do you know it?"

The pink flush deepened in Elma's delicate face.

"Am I?" she asked wistfully. "Really? Oh, I hope you are right. I should be so happy if it were true, but—but, I'm afraid it can't be. No one notices me; no one seems to think I am—nice! I'm only just Elma Ramsden—not radiant, nor irresistible, nor anything of the kind. Plain Elma Ramsden, as much a matter of course as the trees in the park. Since you came here, in one fortnight, you've had more attention than I've had in the whole course of my life."

"*Attention?*" echoed Cornelia, shrilly, and rolled her eyes to the firmament. "Attention? You ken sit there and look me in the face, and talk about the 'attention' that's been paid me the last two weeks! You're crazed! Where does the attention come in, I want to know? I haven't spoken to a single man since the day I arrived. You don't call a dozen old ladies clucking round *attention*, do you? Where *are* all the young men, anyhow? I have been used to a heap of men's society, and I'm kind of lost without it. I call attention having half a dozen nice boys to play about, and do whatever I want. Don't you ever have any nice young men to take you round?"

Elma's dissent was tinged with shocked surprise, for she had been educated in the theory that it was unmaidenly to think about the opposite sex. True, experience had proved that this was an impossibility, for thoughts took wing and flew where they would, and dreams grew of themselves—dreams of someone big, and strong, and tender; someone who would *understand*, and fill the void in one's heart which ached sometimes, and called for more, more; refusing to be satisfied with food and raiment. Sometimes the dream took a definite shape, insisted on the possession of grey eyes and wide square shoulders, associating itself with the personality of a certain young squire of racing, bridge-playing tendencies, at whom all Park dwellers glanced askance, refusing to him the honour of their hospitality!

There remained, however, certain functions at which this outlaw must annually be encountered; functions when one was thrillingly conscious of being signalled out for unusual attention. One remembered, for example, being escorted to eat ices, under the shade of an arbour of crimson ramblers; of talking with tongues about the weather, and the flowers, and the music; while grey eyes looked into blue, and said unutterable things. Oh, the beauty of the sky seen through those rosy branches! Oh, the glory of the sun! There had never been such a summer day before. ... Elma trembled at the remembrance, and then blushed at her own audacity. It was terrible to have to acknowledge such things to one's inmost heart, but to put them into words—! She pursed her lips, and looked demurely scandalised by her companion's plain speaking.

"Do you know, Cornelia,"—she had been commanded to use the Christian name, but it still came with a certain amount of hesitation—"if I were you I would not talk like that before your aunt. We—we don't do it over here! It is not considered—nice—for a girl to talk about young men."

Cornelia smiled slowly. Her beautiful lips curved upwards at the corner, giving an air of impish mischief to her face. She nodded her head three times over, and hitched a shoulder under the muslin gown.

"We-ell?" she drawled in her most pronounced accent, "if I've got to think of 'em, I might as well talk of 'em, and I'm *bound* to think of 'em!" She relaxed the grasp of her knees, and lay back against the trunk of a tree, chuckling softly in retrospective triumph. "I've had such heaps of fun! I just love to carry on, and have half-a-dozen boys quarrelling over me, and hustling to get the first chance. I've had as many as ten bouquets before a ball, and I wore an eleventh, which I'd gotten for myself, and they were all clean crazed to find out who'd sent it. Poppar says I'll be an old maid yet, but it won't be for want of asking. There's one young man who's just daft about me—he's young, and he's lovely, and he's got ten million and a hef dollars, and I've *tried* to love him." She sighed despairing. "I've tried hard, but I *ken't*!"

Elma struggled between disapproval, curiosity, and a shocking mingling of something else, which was not, could not possibly be, *envy* of such adventures! The lingering doubt served to add severity to her indictment.

"It's very wicked to flirt!"

Once again Cornelia flashed her impish smile.

"It's vurry nice! I don't see a mite of use in being young if you ken't have some fun. You grow old fast enough, and then there's nothing else to it but to sit round and preach. Your mother and Aunt Soph have just *got* to preach, but I wouldn't start yet awhile if I were you. You'd be just the prettiest thing that was ever seen if you knew how to fix yourself up, but you *don't*, and you seem to me to mope along the whole blessed time, without a bit of fun to perk you up. Say! don't you feel a bit tired of it sometimes? Don't you ever have a kind of feeling that you want to *do* something for a change?"

"Sometimes! Do I ever!" Elma echoed the words with startling emphasis. "Always, always! It is here,"—she pressed her hands on her breast—"stifled up here all the time—a horrible, rebellious longing to get out; to be free, to do—I don't know what—really I don't—but something *different*! I've lived in Norton all my life, and hardly ever been away. Mother hates travelling in winter, and in the summer she hates to leave the garden, and I'm so strong that I don't need change. I never went to school like other girls. Mother disapproves of school influences, so I had governesses



instead. It's awful to have a resident teacher in the house, and be an only pupil; you feel governessed out of your life. And now I have no friends to visit, or to visit me, only the Norton girls, for whom I don't care. It seems ungrateful when I have so much to be thankful for, but I feel *pent!* Sometimes I get such a wicked feeling that I just long to snap and snarl at everybody. I'm ashamed all the time, and can see how horrid I am, but—"

She broke off, sighing deeply, and Cornelia crouched forward, clasping her knees as before, and bending her chin to meet them, her eyes ashine with eagerness and curiosity.

"Yes, I know; I've been there myself. I was there this morning after just two weeks. I don't begin to have your endurance, my dear, but you take a straight tip from me. When you feel the symptoms coming on, don't you go trying to be sweet and forbearing, and bottling up all the froth; it's not a mite of use, for it's bound to rise to the top, and keeping don't improve it. Just let yourself go, and be right-down ugly to *somebody*—anyone will do, the first that comes handy—and you'll feel a heap better!" She sighed, and turned a roguish glance towards the shrouded windows of The Nook. "I was ugly to Aunt Soph before I came out!"

Already Elma had mastered the subtleties of Americanese sufficiently to understand that the terms "lovely" and "ugly" had no bearing on outward appearance, but were descriptive of character only. Her eyes widened, partly in horrified surprise at listening to a doctrine so diametrically opposed to everything which she had previously heard, and partly in pure, unadulterated curiosity to know the cause of the rebellion.

"To Miss Briskett? Oh, how had you the courage? I should never have *dared*. What was it about?"

"Teas!" replied Cornelia, shortly. "I've attended tea-parties regularly for the last ten days, and met the same people every single time, and now I've struck. I've had about enough teas to last the rest of my natural life, but Aunt Soph seemed to think I was bound to go wherever I was asked. Two more old ladies sent invitations to-day."

"I know—at lunch-time. We got ours, too. You can't refuse, Cornelia, if you haven't another engagement."

"Can't I just? You bet I can. Besides, what's to hinder having an engagement if I want to? Say! let's fix one up right here. I'd be delighted to have you come a drive with me to show me the country, Thursday afternoon at a quarter after four. We could hire something, I suppose, to drive in, and find a place to have tea on the way. We'd have a high old talk, and you'd enjoy it a heap more than the tea-party."

"Oh, I know that, but I don't know if I ought,—Mrs Nevins' invitation came first."

"Shucks!" cried Cornelia, "you've got too much conscience—that's what's the matter with you. You'll never have much of a time in this world if you don't take the pick of a choice. What's two hours, anyway? You go right home, and write nice and pretty to say you're real sorry you've got another engagement. Your mother can trot along with Aunt Soph. They'll enjoy themselves a heap better sitting round without us, talking over the perversities of the young. They were all tame angels when they were girls, and never did anything they ought not to have done. My!" She twisted her saucy nose, and rolled her eyes heavenwards. "I'm thankful I struck a livelier time! As for you, Elma Ramsden, you're going to be equal to any one of them, if nothing happens to shake you up. I guess it's my mission to do the shaking, so we'll start fair from now on. You're engaged to me Thursday afternoon. D'you understand? I guess we'd better go home and break the news before the answers are written."

She rose to her feet, and Elma followed her example, shaking her skirts and fastening on the shady mushroom hat. No further protestations rose to her lips, so it might be taken for granted that silence gave consent, but half-way down the path she spoke again, in tentative, hesitating fashion.

"I don't mind about Mrs Nevins. She is rich and strong, and enjoys her life; but Miss Nesbitt is different. She's an old maid, and poor. She belongs to a good family, so she is asked out with the rest, but she hardly ever gives a tea—not once in a year. It will be a great event to her; she'll be beginning to make preparations even now; baking cakes, and cleaning the silver, and taking off the covers of the drawing-room chairs. It is all in your honour. She'll be disappointed if you don't go."

Cornelia turned upon her with a flash of reproof. "Why couldn't you tell me that before, I want to know? Pretty mean I should have felt, backing out of a thing like that! I wouldn't disappoint the old dear for a fortune. Is it the one with the flat hair, and the little ringlets dangling at the sides? They are too 'cute for anything, those ringlets. Yes! I guessed she was the one, for I noticed her clothes looked all used up. Don't you worry! I'll take tea with Miss Nesbitt as often as she wants, and behave so pretty you'll admire to see me. That's an olive branch to carry in to Aunt Soph—eh? I reckon she'll be pretty dusty."

"I reckon she will." Elma glanced with a half-fearful smile at her companion's unruffled face. "I wouldn't be in your shoes for a hundred pounds. Miss Briskett is formidable enough when she is pleased; but when she is angry—! Cornelia, aren't you frightened?"

Cornelia's joyous peal of laughter floated away on the air, and caught the ears of the industrious Morris, who was sweeping the path a hundred yards away. He turned to lean on his brush and stare, while Elma glanced nervously at the curtained windows.

"I never was scared in my life that I know of, and I'm not going to begin with my very own aunt. I rather like a fizzle now and then—it freshens one up. Don't you worry about me! I'm quite able to stand up for myself."

She pushed open the gate of The Nook as she spoke and sauntered up the path; laughing, bareheaded, radiantly unashamed. Miss Briskett beheld her approach from her seat in the corner of the drawing-room, and two spots of colour shone dully on her thin cheek bones. The hands which held her knitting trembled with indignation, and her eyes welcomed the culprit with a steely flash.

"Cornelia, are you aware that you are forbidden to trespass on the grass of this park?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are also aware, I presume, that to wander alone bareheaded is not the habit of young ladies in this neighbourhood, and that it is intensely annoying to me that you should do so?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You *do* know! You are not ashamed to acknowledge it! Then may I inquire why you have deliberately chosen to do what you know to be wrong?"

Cornelia drew up a comfortable chair and seated herself by her aunt's side, arranging her draperies with a succession of little pulls and pats. She rested one elbow on the arm of the chair, and leant her chin upon the upraised palm, a pretty, thoughtful-looking pose into which she fell naturally in leisure moments. The cat blinked at her through sleepy eyelids, then, deliberately ignoring the devotion of years, rose from its place by its mistress's side, stretched itself with feline grace, and stalked majestically across the rug to nestle against the soft white skirts. Miss Briskett eyed its desertion over the brim of her spectacles. Poor lady! her measure of love received was so small, that she felt a distinct pang at the defection.

"What explanation have you to offer, Cornelia? You knew that you would annoy me?"

"Why, yes, of course. That's all there was to it! It didn't thrill me a mite to walk over a strip of lawn, without figging up in my best duds. I can do that any day I want at home, but I just *had* to raise Cain somehow! It's the only way I ken pull round again when I get mad. I just go right away and do the ugliest thing I can strike, and then I feel all soothed, and calmed down. You try it yourself, next time; it beats knitting stockings all into fits! I'm just as sweet as candy now, so you've got to forgive me, and be friends. I'm sorry I acted so mean, but you were pretty nippy yourself, weren't you now? I guess we've both been used to take our own way without any fluster, and it comes pretty hard to be crossed, but now we've had our fling, we've got to kiss and make friends. That's so; isn't it?"

She bent forward, pouting her lips to receive the token of peace, but Miss Briskett drew back in chilly dignity. For the past hour she had nourished a smouldering resentment, feeling herself the most ill-used of womenkind, and this calm inclusion of herself in the list of wrong-doers did not tend to pour oil on the troubled waters. For Cornelia to acknowledge her deliberate intention to offend, and in the same breath to offer a kiss of reconciliation, showed a reprehensible lack of proper feeling. Miss Briskett was a woman of high principles, and made a point of forgiving her enemies—slowly! As a preliminary process she demanded an abject apology, and a period of waiting, during which the culprit was expected to be devoured by remorse and anxiety. Then, bending from an impeccable height, she vouchsafed a mitigated pardon. "I forgive you, but I can never forget!" Some such absolution she would have been ready to bestow upon a tearful and dejected Cornelia, but the pink and white complaisance of the uplifted face steeled her heart afresh. She shrank back in her chair, ignoring the outstretched hand.

"Excuse me, my dear, but I do not care to kiss a person who has just acknowledged that she has deliberately tried to annoy me. I was naturally displeased at your rejection of my friend's hospitality, but it is exceedingly impertinent to compare my behaviour to your own. You seem to forget that I am your hostess, and nearly three times your age."

"Then you ought to be three times better, oughtn't you?" retorted Cornelia, blandly. "Well, I'll own up that I'm sorry about Miss Nesbitt, and I'll be pleased to take tea with her as often as she likes, but I regret that a previous engagement prevents my going Thursday also. You tell the old lady from me that I'm real sorry to miss the treat, and if it will ease her mind any to know that I don't think England's a patch on America, she's welcome to the information. Elma Ramsden and I have fixed up a drive to see the country, Thursday afternoon."

Miss Briskett's knitting-needles clinked irritably together. A half concession was little better than none, and the frivolous tone of Cornelia's remarks spoke of something far removed from the ideal repentance. Apart from the question of the tea-party, she disapproved of two young girls driving about the country unattended, but her courage shrank from the thought of another battle. She dropped her eyelids, and replied icily—

"As you have already made your arrangements it is useless for me to offer any objections. You are evidently determined to take your own way in spite of anything I can say. I can only trust that no harm may come of the experiment."

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## Chapter Seven.

On Thursday afternoon at three o'clock Cornelia retired to her bedroom, and with the help of the devoted Mary proceeded to make an elaborate toilette for the drive. Those wonderful trunks seemed to contain garments suitable for every possible occasion which could arise; for every fluctuation of weather, for every degree of festivity. From one of the number out came a long driving coat, snowy white, light of texture, an ideal garment for a warm yet dusty summer's day, which being fastened down the side by huge pearl buttons, displayed a degree of smartness nothing short of uncanny in an untrimmed garment. To wear with the coat there was a jaunty cap, and a pair of driving gloves with wide, gauntleted cuffs. Cornelia made faces at herself in the glass as her custom was the while she arranged the "set" of her hat, puffed out her shaded locks, and affably cross-questioned her attendant on her private affairs.

"Mury, how's your friend?"

"He isn't so well as he was, miss, thank you all the same. He's been a bit upset in his indigestion."

"Think of that now! Isn't that sad! You buy him a bottle of physic and send it along. I'll pay! It's not a mite of use

having a friend with indigestion. He'll be just as doleful, and you want him to give you a real good time. ... How's your mother getting along?"

"Nicely, thank you, miss. She said she didn't know how to thank you enough for the shawl. Her poor old bones haven't ached half so much since she's had it to hap round her of a night."

"Isn't that sweet! Hustle up now with my high shoes, and don't mind buttoning in bits of flesh as you did last time. I'd just as lief be left out. See here, Mury, I want everything put back in its place after I'm gone! I hate to find a muss when I get back, and that blue muslin has got to be pressed out for to-night, and those bits of lace washed, and the parcels changed at the shop. Mind, it's got to be all done by the time I am back. And see here, next time you go out to meet your friend, there's that taffetas waist you can have for yourself! You'll look dandy in it, and he'll be so proud. Maybe it will help the indigestion better than physic."

Mary was incoherent with delight, and promised ardently to execute all the young lady's orders, knowing full well that it was the silver afternoon, and that her time should of rights be fully occupied with household duties. She promised, and she intended to perform. By dint of smiles, pleasant words, kindly interests in "friends," and ceaseless doles of finery and physic, Cornelia had established such a hold upon the affections of the staff, that her wish already took precedent of her aunt's law. Mary mentally condemned half the contents of the silver cupboard to neglect, the while she ironed out foaming frills and floating sash ends.

Mrs Ramsden accompanied Elma to the gate of The Nook, and stood beside Miss Briskett looking on with dubious eyes, while the two girls took their places in the high dog-cart. A groom had driven the horse from the livery stable, and both good ladies expected him to take possession of the back seat, in the double capacity of chaperon and guide. It came, therefore, as a shock, when Cornelia dismissed the man with a smile, and a rain of silver dropped into an eager hand, but protestations, feeble and stern, were alike disregarded.

"How do you suppose we are going to talk, with him perched there, with his ears sticking out, listening to every word we say? We don't want any men poking round, this journey!" laughed Cornelia, settling herself in her seat, and taking the reins in her gauntleted hands. Miss Briskett was dismayed to feel a thrill of pride mingling with her displeasure, for the girl looked so fresh, so trim, so sparkingly alive perched up on her high driving seat. Elma Ramsden, for all her superior beauty, looked tame and insignificant beside her. Although she would not condescend to look around, Miss Briskett divined that behind the curtains of the neighbouring houses the occupants were looking on with admiring curiosity, and noting every detail of the girl's attire. If Cornelia were self-willed and defiant, in appearance at least she was a worthy representative of her race. The stern lines of the spinster's mouth relaxed into an unwilling smile as she said urgently—

"But, my dear, the horse! I am responsible for your safety. Are you quite sure that you are capable of managing him?"

Cornelia's ripple of amusement was sufficiently expressive. "One old mare in a hired trap, when I've driven a four-in-hand over some of the wickedest roads in America! If we are smashed, Aunt Soph, you can lay it to providence, and not to my driving. Don't get to worrying if we are late. If we're killed you'll hear all about it soon enough. You can only die once, and a carriage spill is a good slick way of getting it over."

"Cornelia, I insist—"

"Miss Cornelia, I beg—"

The cart dashed suddenly onward in response to a flip of the whip, leaving the two old ladies upon the roadway, the unfinished appeal frozen upon their lips. Elma turned round to wave an abashed adieu, the long habit of servitude struggling with a delicious new sense of liberty and adventure.

"Oh—oh, Cornelia, if you could only see them! They are standing stock-still, staring after us. They look petrified! ... It was naughty of you. You frightened your aunt on purpose."

"That's so!" assented Cornelia, frankly. "I meant to do it. It's going to hurt me a lot more than it does her, as the mommar said when she spanked the nipper, but she's got just as set as a fossil, paddling along in this little backwater, and imagining it's the whole big ocean, and there's no one on hand to rouse her but myself. It's my mission. Wake up, England!" and she flourished her whip dramatically as the mare trotted through the south gateway of the park.

Outside the gate lay a smooth wide road stretching uphill, and in response to a movement of Elma's outstretched hand, Cornelia turned the mare in this direction, flashing a radiant smile into the pink-and-white face.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"How do you feel?"

"Excited!—As if something were going to happen!"

Cornelia nodded sagely.

"Perhaps it is; there's no saying. I've seen horses I'd sooner trust in a scrimmage, but a little spill would do you no harm. You're skeery as a cat. You want nerve, my dear, nerve!" Cornelia flicked her whip round the horse's ears to give emphasis to her words, and chuckled with mischievous amusement as Elma clutched the seat, and gasped in dismay.

"I call this crawling, not driving. When we get out into the real country I'll make her go, so we get some fresh air into our lungs, then you can hold on if you like, but don't pay before the show begins. Now, then—where are we bound?"

Elma cast down her eyes, faintly blushing beneath her hat. Surely there was something infectiously electric in the air this afternoon, or why should her thoughts fly as an arrow from the bow to just that very spot which it should have been her maidenly duty to avoid? She blushed at her own audacity; telling herself sternly that she ought to be ashamed; held the temptation afar off, looking at it, longing after it, regretfully deciding to cast it aside, then with a sudden impetuous change of front, hugged it to her breast. Yes, she would! For one afternoon, one golden, glorious afternoon, she would send prudence to the winds, and follow her own instincts. After all, why not? Because a certain person happened to be squire of a certain district it did not follow that other people could not drive over his land without being suspected of personal designs. It was to the last degree unlikely that one would happen to meet anyone one knew, but if one *did*—Elma acknowledged to herself that a lift of the hat, a glance of pleased recognition, would remain in memory as the pleasantest episode of the afternoon.

As a palliative to her conscience, Elma suggested a farther village as the termination to the drive, directing the course with a thrill of guilty triumph at each fresh turning.

"Ain't this dandy!" cried Cornelia, preening her little head, and showing her white teeth in a smile of delight. "This England of yours is just a 'cute little garden, with the roads rolled out like gravel paths. You'd stare to see the roads about my home. Over here it's all grass and roses. You are a rose, too—a real, sweet garden rose, with the dewdrops on its leaves. If I were an artist I'd paint a picture of you on one panel, and Aunt Soph on the other, as two types of English life, and the people could look on, and learn a lesson. It's kinder sweet and touching to dream along so long as you're young, but if you go on keeping your eyes shut, it don't pan out well in old age. It's best to have 'em wide open, and realise that there are two or three more people in the world beside yourself."

Elma smiled in vague, preoccupied fashion. Her own thoughts were all engrossing, and at every fresh winding of the road she held her breath in suspense, while the wild rose colour deepened in her cheeks. Suppose—suppose they met him! How would he look? What would he do? What would he think? Even the compliment to herself faded into insignificance beside such questions as these.

The mare was trotting briskly along a high level road, on the right side of which lay the boundary wall of a large estate—the estate, every inch of which was thrilling with interest to one onlooker, at least; to the right a bank of grass sloped gradually to a lower road, beneath which again could be seen a wide-stretched panorama of country. Cornelia slackened the reins, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the moment.

Up to now decorous toddles to and fro the outlying villas had been her only form of exercise, and she was amazed and delighted with the verdant beauty of the scene. As Elma did not seem inclined for conversation she made no further remark, and for the next quarter of an hour the two girls drove onward in silence, each happy in her own thoughts, in the sunshine, in the sweet, balmy air, fragrant with the scent of the flowering trees. Then of a sudden one of the lodges of the park came into view, and on the roadside beside the door a dazzling golden object, at sight of which Cornelia puckered puzzled brows.

"What in the land's name is that? The sun dazzles so that I can't see."

"It's a—a cage, I think! I see something like bars."

"What fool-trick are they up to, then, putting a gilt cage on the high road in the blazing sunshine? They might use the sense they were born with. Steady, old lady, steady!" cried Cornelia, soothingly, as the mare pricked up her ears and shied uneasily to the farther side of the road. "Yes, it's a cage right enough, and a poll parrot inside. Guess I'll pull up at that house, and tell the inmates that it looks for all the world like a blazing firework on the side of the path; enough to scare any horse in creation. This old lady is as nervous as a cat!"

The fact was painfully apparent even to Elma's inexperience, for the mare, refusing to be soothed by Cornelia's cajoling words and chuckles, shied still nearer the opposite hedge, her ears cocked nervously erect. Seen nearer at hand, and out of the direct dazzle of sunlight, the cage looked innocent enough with its grey inmate swinging solemnly to and fro on its perch, but as the cart swung rapidly past, Mistress Poll evidently felt that it was time to assert herself, and opened her mouth to emit a shrill, raucous cry, at the sound of which the mare bounded forward in a headlong gallop.

"I knew it!" cried Cornelia, shortly. "I just guessed that had to come next." She sat bolt upright, twisting the reins round her fingers, her lips pressed into a thin red line, her eyes ashine with an excitement in which was more than a spice of enjoyment. She shook herself impatiently free from Elma's frenzied grasp. "Now, then, none of that! You leave my arms alone. I'll need all my strength before we're through with this trouble. My stars and stripes, how she does pull."

"Oh, oh, Cornelia! What shall we do? What shall we do? Shall we be thrown? What's going to happen? *Cornelia?*"

Not by a fraction of an inch did Cornelia turn her head in answer to this frenzied appeal. Upright as a dart she sat in her seat, her slender wrists straining at the reins.

"Don't yelp!" she said shortly. "Keep that till you're hurt. Say! what happens to the road after the next turn?"

"I don't know. ... Oh, what shall we do? Why did we ever come? ... Cornelia, can you hold her back?..."

"No!" snapped Cornelia, shortly. "I can't!—Not for many minutes longer, at this rate. My wrists are about broken as it is. What happens after this turning, I say? You must know. Use your brains, for goodness' sake—if you want any left to use another day. Is it a good road—better than this? What's on the sides—hedgerows, walls, water? For the land's

sake, child, sort your ideas!”

Thus admonished, Elma made a violent effort to pull herself together. For reasons already mentioned, this particular bit of country was clearly imprinted on her memory, and she had but to collect her scattered wits to see a clear picture of the path ahead.

“The road is quite good. There is a wall—two walls. Some farm buildings on the right. At the end there is a hill; it leads down into the next village.”

“Humph!” Cornelia’s nostrils dilated widely, and two spots of pink showed on her white cheeks. “Then I guess this is the end of the volume. A grass bank is better than a wall any day of the week. ... Now then, young woman, if you’ve got any grit stowed away, get it out, and use it. *It’s coming!* Are you ready?”

“No, no!” shrieked Elma, wildly. She clutched the seat with despairing hands, as with a sudden convulsive movement Cornelia switched the mare violently to the right. “Help, help! Oh, help—”

The bank rose before her eyes in a sudden mountainous sweep; the mare, instead of being in front, soared suddenly on the top of the trap; the hinges creaked and strained; and the seat assumed a perpendicular position. It was all over in a couple of minutes, but to Elma it seemed as many hours. She had time to hear the rush of approaching footsteps, to see over the top of the hedge three startled masculine faces; to recognise the nearer of the three with a great throb of relief, and to stretch out her arms towards him with a shrill cry of appeal—then the crash came, and she was shot headlong into space.

Fireworks! that was the first impression. Little dots of flame flitting about before her eyes, forming into circles of light and whizzing rapidly round and round. Then when her eyes were open, a heavy confused stupor, in which she saw, but refused to understand. Why was she lying on the grass in the middle of the day? Why did Cornelia look so queer, with her face stained with soil, and her hat on one side? Why did they offer her things to drink? She wasn’t thirsty; the tea was bad; it stung her mouth. It wasn’t tea at all, but something hot and nasty. It was brandy out of a flask! Elma lifted big, lovely eyes of a pansy blue, and stared vacantly into the face by her side, but at the sight of it memory came back in a rush. She sat up stiffly, moving her limbs in nervous, tentative fashion—gasped, sighed, and quavered out a tremulous—

“What happened? Is it all over? Are we saved?”

Cornelia loomed above her, alert even in this moment of shock and dishevelment. One cheek was plastered with soil; patches of green stain discoloured her coat, her hair hung rakishly askew, yet never had her manner been more composed nor complacently matter of fact.

“We’ve had a pretty lucky let-off. You are alive all right, and I guess there’s not much the matter with you but nerves. There’s nothing wrong with your lungs, anyway. You scared the mare pretty near as much as the bird—yelping like a crazed thing, and hanging on to my arm. The grass is soft enough. It hasn’t hurt you any. You needn’t worry feeling all over to see if there’s a break. You’d know it fast enough if there were.”

“Miss Ramsden is feeling stunned. I think it would be wiser to allow her to recover gradually. It is a shock to—er—to most systems, to be shot out of a cart, however short the distance!”

The masculine voice was thunderous with indignation, and the arm which supported Elma’s back tightened its hold, as if to protect her against the world. Cornelia turned aside, her red lips twisted into a smile, and walked along the bank to where the other two men were unharnessing the mare, which lay on her side trembling with fright, the blood oozing from several ugly-looking cuts and scratches. As Cornelia walked she held her right wrist tightly with her left hand, as if she still felt the strain of that wrestle with the reins, but there was no flinching in voice or manner as she stood over the men, issuing instructions in brisk, incisive tones. The nearer of the two was impressed to the extent of ceasing work to touch his cap; the second darted one contemptuous glance in her direction, and placidly continued to disobey. Cornelia promptly knelt on the grass by his side, with intent to demonstrate her own greater efficiency, but the first movement of the strained wrist brought a flush of pain to her cheeks. She sat back, pursing her lips together to restrain an involuntary groan, while the stranger flashed a second look in her direction. He was a tall, lean, somewhat cadaverous—looking man, with steel-like eyes shaded by haughty eyelids, perpetually adroop as though no object on earth were worthy of his regard. Cornelia took him in in a swift, comprehensive glance, and with youthful ardour decided that she loathed the creature.

“Hurt yourself?”

“Not a bit, thanks. I guess there’s enough of you to do the work without me, but I’m used to seeing things done in a hurry, and you seemed pretty deliberate—”

“A little caution is not thrown away sometimes. What induced you to come out driving alone if you could not manage a horse?”

There being no reply to this question, and the last buckle of the harness being unstrapped, the speaker turned an inquiring glance over his shoulder, to behold a rigid figure and a face ablaze with indignation.

There was something in the girl’s face at that moment so vital, so bizarre and arresting, that so long as Rupert Guest lived, it remained with him as one of the most striking pictures in his mental picture-gallery. He had but to pass a high green hedge in the June sunshine, to catch the fragrance of the honeysuckle and roses, and it rose up before him again—the white, furious face, with the red, roughened locks, and the gleam of white teeth through the scarlet lips. There was no admiration in his thoughts; this was not at all the type of girl whom he admired, but she was a being by herself, different from anyone whom he had met. He stared at her with curious attention.

"Do you mean," said Cornelia, in the slow, even tones of intense anger, "that you think this was my doing—that I upset the cart by my bad driving? If that's so, you are a little out in your reckoning. If I hadn't been used to horses all my days we might have been in kingdom come by this time. I *pulled* her into the bank before worse things happened!"

"Then what sent her off in the first instance?"

"A poll parrot, screeching in its cage, set right out in the roadway by some fool owner, who ought to be had up for murder."

The stranger pursed up his lips in an expressive whistle, then suddenly sprang upwards as the mare, freed from her harness, rolled on her side and struggled to her feet, where she stood shivering and tossing her head, displaying fresh cuts and bruises in her dusty coat. The labourer put his hand on her neck, soothing her with gentle words and touches, while his master surveyed her with kindly concern.

"Poor brute! Better take her to the stables, James, and send off for a vet. Mrs Greville can no doubt spare a carriage to take these ladies home." He turned towards Cornelia with an impulse of provocation which seemed to spring from some source outside himself. As a rule he was chivalrous where women were concerned, but there was something in the personality of this girl which aroused his antagonism. It seemed almost a personal offence that she should be so alert and composed while the mare bled and trembled, and that pale, lovely thing lay like a broken snowdrop on the bank. He felt a growing desire to annoy, to wound, to break down this armour of complacent vanity.

"So you could not hold her till she tired herself out? Well! the experiment seems to have answered less successfully from her point of view than your own. She'll need a considerable time to recover her nerves and give these scratches time to heal."

"Skin deep!" sneered Cornelia, with a curl of the lip. "I'll drive her back in a day or two; and up and down this road until she learns not to play that trick again. I've never given in to a horse yet, and I'm not going to begin with a hack mare!"

The stranger eyed her with cold disapproval.

"Perhaps her owner may refuse to allow her to be experimented upon again. I should, in his place! It may be foolish, but I hate to see a brute suffer, even for the noble purpose of proving my own superiority."

He swung away as he spoke, thus failing to see the stunned blankness of Cornelia's expression. Straight as a dart she stood, with head thrown back, scarlet lips pressed tightly together, and dark brows knitted above the wounded tragedy of her eyes. The labourer standing by the mare's side looked towards her with honest sympathy. He had had personal experience of the "length of the Captain's tongue," and was correspondingly sympathetic towards another sufferer. A tender of dumb animals, he was quick to understand the expression on the girl's face, and to know that she had been wrongfully accused.

"Don't you take on, miss!" he said, touching his cap with the unashamed servility at which the American girl never ceased to wonder. "I'll look after her meself, and if the dirt is washed out of the sores at once, she'll come to no harm. Likely as not there'll be nothing for the vet to do by the time he arrives. At the worst it'll be only a few stitches. She'll soon get over that."

Cornelia shivered, and bit hard on her lower lip. She slipped her hand into an inside pocket of the white coat, and, coming a step nearer, dropped a coin into the man's hand. He cast down his eyes, started, and flushed a deep red.

"Thank you, miss. Beg pardon, but you've made a mistake!"

A sovereign lay brightly on his grimy palm; he stared at it with respectful awe, scarcely regretful, since it did not enter his mind to conceive that such a munificent gift could seriously have been offered for his acceptance. It had seldom happened that he had had the handling of such a fortune, since his whole weekly earnings reached a total of eighteen shillings, but Cornelia in her turn looked abashed and discomfited, thrusting her hand once again into the tightly-buttoned little pocket.

"I'm sorry! I ken't get used to your money over here. Will that make it enough?"

To the man's utter stupefaction she placed a second sovereign beside the first in his outstretched palm. He stared at it with distended eyes, thrilled by the discovery that she *had* meant it after all, awed by the revelation of such munificence.

"Beg pardon, miss, I was thinking as you'd mistook it for a shilling, not making so bold as to complain. I thank your ladyship kindly! I'm sure I can't rightly say what I ought—"

He stuttered, incoherent with excitement, but even as he spoke he held out the second sovereign, and Cornelia understood that his good feeling permitted him to accept only what had been originally offered. She would have felt the same in his place, and realising as much, took back the coin without a demur.

"Well! it's waiting for you next time I come, if you've done your duty by that mare."

She turned, and walked slowly back to where the two men were standing talking together, some eight or ten yards away. Their backs were turned towards her, and her assailant of a few minutes past was evidently answering an appeal from his friend. She caught the last words as she drew near: "I will go to the stable and look after the mare. ... You can take them up to the house without my help. I can't stand any more of that girl—"

He wheeled round as he spoke, and found himself face to face with Cornelia. They stared each other full in the eyes, like two combatants measuring strength before a battle.

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## Chapter Eight.

To Elma it was still a dream, but a dream growing momentarily more wonderful and thrilling. The stupor in her head was passing away, and there was nothing painful in the lassitude which remained. She was just weak and languid, content to lie still in the sunshine, her head resting on one of the cushions from the overturned cart, her eyes turning instinctively to the bronzed face which bent over her with such tender solicitude.

As for Geoffrey Greville, he was realising with a curious mingling of dismay and elation that the moment was fated to be historic in the story of his life. For the last two years he had been haunted by the vision of Elma Ramsden's flower-like face at odd, but by no means inconsequent, moments. When, for instance, his mother expatiated on the duty of marriage for a man in his position, and extolled the fascinations of certain youthful members of county society; when he walked down the long picture-gallery, and regarded the space on the wall where his wife's portrait might some day hang beside his own; when he sat at the head of his table, and looked across at the opposite space; why was it that in such moments as these the face of this one girl flashed forward, and persistently blocked the way? Elma Ramsden!—just a little, insignificant girl, whom he had met at half a dozen garden parties, and at homes. She did not even belong to the county set, but was the daughter of a funny, dumpy little mother, who disapproved on principle of everything smart and up-to-date—himself emphatically included. The good lady evidently regarded him as a wicked, fox-like creature, whose society was fraught with danger to her tender bantling. He had seen her clucking with agitation as he had sat with Elma beneath the trees.

Mrs Greville had a calling acquaintance with the Park ladies, and occasionally referred with a blighting toleration to "Goody Ramsden," but she never by any chance mentioned Mrs Ramsden's daughter. Geoffrey was doubtful whether she realised the fact of Elma's existence. Up till now he himself had drifted along in the easy-going manner of bachelors approaching their thirtieth birthday before the crucial moment arrives which acts as a spark to smouldering flames. He had indulged in lazy day-dreams in which Elma played the part of heroine; had thoroughly enjoyed her society when fate placed her in his way, without, however, exerting himself to take any active steps to secure additional meetings. This afternoon as he walked across the meadow with his friend, he would have indignantly denied the accusation that he was in love, but the historic moment was at hand. A cry for help rang in his ears; above the hedge he caught a glimpse of a white, frenzied face, and saw two hands held out towards him in appeal.

The anguished grip of the heart with which he realised at once Elma's identity, and her peril, was a revelation of his own feelings which could not be reasoned away. As he knelt by her side in those first anxious moments he was perhaps almost as much stunned as herself, for in the flash of an eye his whole life had altered. Where he had doubted, he was now convinced; where he had frivoleed, he was in deep, intense earnest; the fact that there would be certain difficulties to overcome only seemed to strengthen the inward determination. If Elma would accept him, she should be his wife though the whole world were against them!

And Elma lay and looked at him with her dazed, lovely eyes, allowing him to arrange the cushions under her head with a simple acquiescence which seemed to him the sweetest thing in the world. Now that the first dread was relieved, he felt a guilty satisfaction in the knowledge of her prostration, and of the damage done to horse and cart. It was impossible that she could drive back to Norton without some hours' rest, and a special providence seemed to have arranged that the accident should take place close to his own gates. He was too much engrossed in his own interests to notice the look which was exchanged between his friend and Cornelia, and as the Captain turned, away discomfited, Geoffrey eagerly addressing his remarks to the girl herself.

"I want to get Miss Ramsden up to the house. She must rest and be looked after, and my mother will be delighted—I mean, she'd be awfully distressed if you didn't come. It's not far—only a few hundred yards up the avenue. I could carry her easily if she can't manage to walk."

But at that Elma sat up, a spot of colour shining on her white cheeks.

"Ah, but I can; I'm better! I'm really quite well. But it's giving so much trouble. I could wait in the lodge..."

"Indeed you couldn't; I wouldn't allow it! There's no accommodation there, and the children would annoy you. Take my arm and lean on me. Miss—er—your friend will support you on the other side."

"Briskett!" volunteered Cornelia, bowing towards him in gracious acknowledgment. "Now then, Elma, up with you! Guess you're about sick of that bank by this time. There's nothing to it but nerves, and that won't prevent you walking with a prospect of tea ahead. You're not half as bad as you think you are."

Elma thought she was a good deal worse! The sudden rise to her feet, drawn by two strong hands, brought with it a return of the faintness, and for a moment it seemed as if Geoffrey would have to carry out his first proposition. She struggled bravely, however, and Cornelia forcibly ducked her head forward—a sensible, though on the face of it, rather a callous remedy, of which Geoffrey plainly disapproved. He drew the little hand through his arm, pressing it close to his side, and thus linked together the three made their way to the lodge-gate and up the winding avenue.

As they went Cornelia kept casting quick, scrutinising glances at her companions, her brain busily at work trying to place this stranger, whose name had never been mentioned in her hearing, but who yet appeared to take such a deep interest in Elma's welfare. Once, with a sigh, the girl had regretted that her mother disapproved of "some of the nicest people in the neighbourhood." Was Geoffrey Greville to be regarded as representing that vague quantity? Again, with a second sigh, Elma had confessed that the county people on their side showed no desire to cultivate her own acquaintance. This afternoon, with a blush, she had maintained that the best road lay through Steadway, though

a signpost persistently pointed in another direction. Two sighs, and a blush! In the court of love such evidence is weighty, while of still greater import was the manner in which Elma clung for support to the arm on the right, leaving only the gentlest pressure on that to the left.

As for the man himself, there could be no doubt that he had reached the stage of entire subjugation. His whole bearing was instinct with possessive pride, his strong, bronzed features softened into a beautiful tenderness as he watched the flickering colour in Elma's cheeks, and smiled encouragement into her eyes. He had a good face; a trifle arrogant and self-satisfied, no doubt, but these were failings which would be mitigated by the power of an honest love. For the rest, he looked strong, and brave, and true. Cornelia's frown gave way to a smile of approval.

"I guess it's just about as 'cute a little romance as you can read for a dollar, and just as English! Her mommar don't approve of him, 'cause he's smart and worldly; and *his* mommar don't approve of *her*, 'cause she lives in a row, and don't mix with the tip-top set. She sits still and mopes, and he sets to and kills the first thing that comes handy, to distract his thoughts, and they're going to stick right there till the door's closed, and the lamps give out. This is where *you* step in, Cornelia Briskett! You've got to waltz round and fix up this business while you've a chance.—I guess I've been a bit too bracing. I'd better begin to feel a bit scared about Elma's health. ... Seems to me she's had a pretty bad shock and wants to settle right in, and not risk another move for the next three or four days!..."

The scarlet lips twisted whimsically, and a dimple dipped in the white cheek. If there was one thing Cornelia loved above another, it was to feel herself a kind of *Deus ex machina*, and she experienced a malicious satisfaction in ranging herself on the side of the lovers, in the battle between youth and age.

Presently a curve in the road brought the house into view, and the sight of its mullioned windows and old grey stone gables brought with it a sudden remembrance of her own dishevelled condition. The disengaged hand darted up to her head to set the cap at the correct angle, and from thence continued a patting, smoothing-out excursion, productive of distinctly smartening results. Fortunately the long coat had sheltered the dress from harm, so that on reaching the house she could shed it and look "just so." As for Elma, it was a comfort to see her a little "mussed," for in her conscientious adherence to order she sacrificed much of the picturesque nature of her beauty.

The great oak door stood hospitably open. At the inner glass door an old butler appeared, and was immediately despatched by the Squire to find his mistress, and inform her that her son had brought home two ladies who had experienced a carriage accident at the gates. Meantime Geoffrey led the way into the drawing-room, and while Elma rested thankfully against the cushions on her chair, Cornelia enjoyed her first view of a room in a typical English country house. It fascinated her by its very difference from the gorgeous apartments which took its place in her own country. Space, daintiness, simplicity—these were the first impressions. Long French windows standing open to a velvet stretch of lawn; deep chairs and couches covered with chintz; pale green walls and the fragrance of many flowers. A closer inspection showed the intrinsic value and beauty of each detail which went to make up the charming whole. Sheraton cabinets holding specimens of rare old china; ivory miniatures of Grevilles, dead and gone, simpering in pink-and-white beauty in the velvet cases on the walls; water-colours signed by world-famed artists; wonderful old sconces holding altar-like lines of candles; everywhere the eye turned, something beautiful, rare and interesting, and through it all an unobtrusive good taste, which placed the most precious articles in quiet corners, and filled the foreground with a bower of flowers.

"It's just—gaudy!" said Cornelia to herself, using her favourite superlative with sublime disregard of suitability. She looked across the room to where Elma sat, resting her head against a brocaded blue cushion. One of the half-dozen cases of miniatures hung just behind the chair, and it was impossible not to notice the likeness between the living face and those portrayed on the ivory backgrounds. Actual similarity of feature might not exist, but the delicate colouring, the fine lines of the features, the loosened cloud of hair, made the resemblance striking enough. If some day Elma's own miniature should be added to the number, it would fully sustain the reputation for the beauty so long enjoyed by the women of the house.

Coming back from the voyage of comparison, Cornelia's eyes met those of the Squire fixed upon her in a questioning fashion. He averted them instantly, but all his determination could not restrain the mantling blush which dyed his cheek, and she had little doubt that his own thoughts had been a duplicate of her own. Before the silence was broken, however, the door opened, and Mrs Greville entered the room.

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## Chapter Nine.

It was Mrs Greville's pleasure to be addressed as "Madame" by the members of her household, and the name had spread until it was now adopted as a sobriquet by the entire neighbourhood. The tradesmen instructed their underlings to pay implicit attention to "Madame's" orders; the townfolk discussed "Madame's" clothes and manner, alternately aggrieved and elated, as she smiled upon them, or stared them haughtily in the face. Her friends adopted it for ease, and Mrs Greville herself was well pleased that it should be so. She would have disdained a cheap title, but it seemed fitting that she should be known by a more distinguished and exclusive designation than the vulgar "Mrs", which was equally the property of the meanest of her dependants. She was a graceful woman, with a narrow face, aquiline features, and a society smile. She dressed perfectly, in soft satins and brocades; not black, but of rich, subdued colours, softened by fichus of lace, while her wonderfully silky white hair was dressed in the latest and most elaborate fashion. To-day, her dress was of a dull heliotrope, a bunch of Parma violets was fastened in the folds of the fichu at the breast, ruffles of old point d'Alençon lace fell back from her wrists, and as she moved there came the glint of diamonds, discreetly hidden away. Elma recalled her mother's afternoon costume of black cashmere, with prickly jet edging on the cuffs, and felt several degrees more faint and weary from pure nervous collapse. Cornelia beamed in artistic satisfaction.

"Mother, you know Mrs Ramsden! This is her daughter, and her friend, Miss—er—Briskett. I happened to be behind a hedge just as their cart overturned. It was all the fault of that lunatic, Mrs Moss—what must she do but stick her



blessed parrot cage on the side of the road, to frighten stray horses out of their wits! It's a mercy they were not all killed. Miss Ramsden has had a severe shock."

"Poor dear! How trying for you!" ejaculated Madame, in gushing tones of sympathy. (What she *really* said was "Paw dar!" as Cornelia was quick to note; storing up the fact, to produce next time she herself was accused of murdering the English language!) "How quite too senseless of Mrs Moss! She really is an impossible woman—but so clean! One can't expect brains, can one, in persons of that class? So sweet of you to come up, and let us do what we can to comfort you. It is really our fault, isn't it? Employers' liability, you know, and that kind of thing! Is the horse hurt? Your hands are hot, dear, but you look white. Now what is it to be? Tea? Wine? Sal volatile? Tell me just what you think would help you most!"

She held Elma's hand in her own, and stretched out the other towards Cornelia, thus making both girls feel the warmth of her welcome. Elma smiled her pretty, shy smile, but left it to her friend to reply. She was considerably astonished at the sudden development of anxiety which the answer displayed.

"I guess, if you don't mind, Miss Ramsden had better lie right-down for a spell. She's had some brandy, and a cup of tea would be pretty comforting, but it's rest she needs most of all. It's a pretty hard strain sitting by, and watching someone else driving straight to glory. When you've got something to do, there's not so much time to think. The spill was bound to come, so it was up to me to choose the softest place!"

Mrs Greville stared, in obvious disregard of the meaning of the words.

"Why, you are American! How odd! I've never met an American in Norton before, in all the years I have lived here!"

"I'm not a mite surprised!" replied Cornelia, with a depth of meaning which her hearers failed to fathom. They imagined that she was humbly appreciative of her own good fortune in visiting a neighbourhood as yet preserved from the desecration of the American tourists, whereas she was mentally reviewing the sleepy shops where the assistants took a solid five minutes to procure twopence change, the broken-down flies which crawled to and from the station; the tortoise-like round of village life.

"If Providence had sent over half a dozen more like me a dozen years ago, there's no saying but they might be rubbing their knuckles into their eyes by now, and beginning to wake up! I've got to butt right in, if I'm to make any mark by the end of three months!"

Such were the young woman's mental reflections, while Geoffrey rang the bell and anticipated his mother's order for tea. He was anxious that Elma should lie down then and there, but she refused to do so, with a glance from the delicate cushions to her own dusty boots. Cornelia's openly expressed solicitude had had the not unnatural result of increasing her feeling of exhaustion, and the colour flamed and faded in her cheeks as she endeavoured to drink tea and take part in the conversation which ensued. Mother and son watched her continuously, the one with unconcealed anxiety, the other with a wholly impersonal admiration, as though the girl were a new article of furniture, which fitted unusually well into its niche. Her air was kindly enough, but too dispassionate to be sympathetic. Elma Ramsden hardly counted as an independent human being in the estimation of Madame Greville, but she was a lovely piece of flesh and blood, at whom it was pleasant to look. It would be a thousand pities if her beauty were marred. It was more in a spirit of a connoisseur than a friend that she made the inquiry which her son was already longing to prompt.

"My dear child, you look very ill! How are we going to get you home? Your own cart is injured, you say. I think you had better have the brougham, where you can rest against the cushions. You shall have our horses, of course. They won't run away with you, though I don't say they have never done it before! I like a horse with a spirit of its own, but these two have been out to-day, so they ought to be pretty quiet."

At this reassuring speech Elma turned white to the lips, and for a moment swayed in her seat, as if about to faint. Cornelia sprang to her side, while Geoffrey whispered to his mother in urgent tones, to which she listened with lifted brows, half-petulant, half-amused. A final nod and shrug proved her consent, and she turned to Elma with a gracious air of hospitality. Madame could never be less than gracious to a guest in her own house!

"My dear child, forgive me! I did not realise how unnerved you were. Of course, you must not dream of returning home to-night. Your mother and I are old friends, and she will trust me to take care of you. Your friend will tell her that you are going to rest quietly here until you are better. Quite a charity, I assure you, to keep me company! It will remind me of the days before my own Carol deserted me for that monster, and went off to India. Only daughters should not be allowed to marry in their mother's lifetime. Remember that when your time comes! You won't, of course, but it's horribly ungrateful all the same. Now that's settled! To-morrow they can send you out some things, but for to-night I can supply all you need. A tea-gown fits anyone, and I've a dream which has just come home, that will suit you to distraction. Don't worry any more, dear—it's all settled!"

But Elma was palpitating with agitation. That she, Elma Ramsden, should be invited to spend several days at Norton Manor seemed altogether too unlooked for and extraordinary a happening to be realised. She was overcome with gratitude, with regret, with incredulity, for of course it was impossible to accept. Madame could not be in earnest! The invitation was merely a polite form of speech! Even if she did mean it, her own mother would strongly disapprove, for did she not consider Madame a hopeless worldling, and her son a wolf in sheep's clothing, a type of everything that a young man should not be? Oh, no! it was quite, quite impossible, all the more so that she longed, longed intensely; longed from the very bottom of her heart, to accept!

Elma straightened herself in her chair, protesting, explaining, thanking, and refusing in confused broken sentences, to which none of her hearers paid the least attention. Mrs Greville and her son waived objections aside with the easy certainty of victory, while Cornelia cried briskly—

"You don't hev a choice! I undertook to bring you out, but I won't take you back if I know it, until you ken sit behind a horse without going off into hysterics every time he tosses his mane. Your mother'd be a heap more scared to see you coming back looking like a death's head, than to hear that you were comfortably located with a friend till you pulled round. I guess there's nothing for you to do but to say 'Thank you,' as prettily as you know how, and settle down to be comfortable. Why make a fuss?"

That last exhortation was decisive! Elma blushingly subsided into the silence which gives consent, and was forthwith escorted to the room which was to be given over to her use, there to rest quietly until it should be time to dress for dinner.

"Unless she would like to go to bed at once. Do you think that would be the better plan?" Madame asked Cornelia in a whispered aside, but that young lady was quick to veto a retirement which would be so detrimental to the progress of the "cure" which she had at heart.

"Why, no, indeed! To be left alone to worry herself ill, brooding over the whole affair, is about the worst thing that could happen to her just now. It was only a play-baby spill, but it seems the worst accident that the world ever knew to her. She's got to be roused! I'll sit up here and see that she rests quietly for an hour, and then I'll fix her up for the evening, so she can lie on a sofa and listen while you talk. I must get home by seven o'clock to soothe the old ladies. It would be real sweet if you'd lend something to take me back! I'm afraid I ken't walk all the way."

Madame laughed pleasantly.

"I wish we could keep you, too, but it would not be kind to Mrs Ramsden to leave her with only a message to-night. I must hope to have the pleasure another time. You American girls are so bright and amusing, and I love to be amused. My son wishes me to have a companion, but a well-conducted young woman who knew her place would exasperate me to distraction, and I should kill anyone who took liberties, so the situation is a little hard to fill. Do tell me who you are? Where are you staying in Norton, and how long have you been in England?"

"Just over three weeks, and I like it pretty well, thank you," returned Cornelia, anticipating the inevitable question, "though I guess I've not struck the liveliest spot in the land. I'm located with my aunt, Miss Briskett, in the Park, and my poppar's coming over to fetch me in the fall."

Madame's interest waned with surprising suddenness. Of an American girl, almost more than any other, is that worldly adage true that it is wise to treat her politely, since there is no knowing whom she may ultimately marry.

A girl of such striking appearance and obvious affluence might belong to anyone, or become anything in these radical, topsy-turvy days. The mother of a son with broad acres and small income could not but remember that a large proportion of present-day duchesses hail from across the water, but it was a very different matter when the young woman suddenly assumed the personality of the niece of a middle-class spinster resident at the Manor gates. To Mrs Greville, Miss Briskett stood as a type of all that was narrow, conventional, and depressing. As much as she could trouble herself to dislike any woman outside her own world, she disliked the rigid, strait-laced spinster, and was fully aware that the dislike was returned. Miss Briskett invariably declined the yearly invitations which were doled out to her in company with the other townfolk, satisfied that in so doing she proclaimed a dignified disapproval of the frivolities of the Manor. "Thank goodness, that old cat's not coming!" was Madame's invariable reception of the refusals, but at the bottom of her heart she resented the fact that so insignificant a person should dare to reject her hospitality.

"Miss Briskett's niece. Really! How ver-ry interesting!" she drawled, in a tone eloquent of the most superlative indifference. Her easy graciousness of manner became suddenly instinct with patronage, her eyelids drooped with languid disdain. She sauntered round the room, giving a touch here and there, turned over the garments which her maid had laid on the bed ready for Elma's use, and finally sailed towards the door. "We will leave you to rest, then, as long as you think fit. Pray ring for anything you require!"

The door closed, leaving Elma to snoodle down on her pillows, with a sigh of relief, while Cornelia lifted her skirt in both hands and danced a pas seul, bowing low towards the doorway, blowing kisses from her finger-tips the while, after the manner of riders in a circus.

She pranced and pirouetted, while Elma protested in shocked surprise. It struck her that Cornelia's anxiety as to her own condition had died a remarkably sudden death with the disappearance of Mrs Greville from the room. A pantomimic display was not the best way to ensure quiet and repose, nor was there much sympathy to be read in the expression of the twinkling golden eyes. Elma found herself blushing before their gaze, and guiltily drooping her lashes.

"Cornelia, what do you mean?"

"Columns, my dear, which sweet little buds like you ought to know nothing about! You lie still, and look pretty, and ask no questions; that's *your* part in the play! You've got to remember that you've had a shock, and your nervous system's all to pieces. You don't have no pain, nor suffering, and anyone to look at you might think you were quite robust; but just as soon as you make the least exertion, you're all of a flop, and have to be waited on hand and foot! —That's so, isn't it now!"

Elma's delicate brows were furrowed in her attempt to make out what Cornelia *did* mean, and what she didn't! There was a note in her voice which did not ring true—a good-naturedly mocking note, which accorded ill with the words themselves. She blushed still deeper, and put on an air of wounded dignity.

"I certainly am very far from well. My head feels so light and swimming. I should be very sorry to have to walk far at present. Coming upstairs just now tried me horribly."

Cornelia clapped her hands in approval.

“Capital! capital! Keep it at that, and you can’t do better. Go slow, and don’t try to mend all of a sudden. Even when you *do* begin to buck up, in a day or two’s time, the very sight of a horse will set you palpitating for all you’re worth. You’ll kind-er feel as if you’d rather crawl home on all fours than sit behind the steadiest old nag that was ever raised. It’s three or four miles from home, isn’t it, or maybe more—much too far for an invalid to attempt, for a week at least. Just a little saunter in the grounds will be all you’re fit for this side Sunday, *with someone to support you carefully as you go!* ... You’ll be apt to turn giddy if you go about alone. ... Have you gotten that nicely off by heart now, so you won’t go forgetting at the wrong moments?”

“Why should I forget? Surely my own feelings will be my best guide?”

“Yes, ‘um!” said Cornelia, demurely. She let her lids droop over her tell-tale eyes, and stood beside the couch for a long, eloquent moment, during which the flickering colour deepened on Elma’s cheek; then turned aside, took down a book from a shelf, and settled herself comfortably on a wicker chair.

“I guess we understand one another, and there’s no more to be said. Now for one hour by the clock you’ve to shut your eyes and be quiet. Go to sleep if you can! I’ll wake you up in time for the prinking.”

Elma buried her head in the cushions and shed a silent tear. Cornelia was laughing at her, and she could not bear it. Her mind, trained to habits of introspection, began at once to wonder if she were *really* pretending, as the other seemed to think; if the agitation which she felt was not so much the result of the accident, as caused by the excitement of seeing Geoffrey Greville, and meeting his ardent glances. The prospect of remaining in the same house and of meeting him from hour to hour was incredible but delightful, yet Elma would give it up a hundred times over, rather than accept hospitality under false pretences. Was it her duty to insist upon returning home? Should she announce that she felt so much refreshed by her rest that there was no longer any reason why she should be treated as an invalid? The sinking feeling of disappointment which followed this inspiration was easily mistaken for a physical symptom. Yes. She *was* ill! It was quite true that she felt faint. Surreptitiously she felt her own pulse, and was convinced that its beat had increased. She thought of the expression of Geoffrey’s eyes as he lifted her from the ground—blushed, and felt certain that she was feverish. Yes, she would stay! It would be foolish and ungrateful to refuse. Mother had always warned her not to run risks where health was concerned...

A soft little sigh of contentment sounded through the room. If Elma had been fifteen years younger this was the moment at which a warm, sticky little thumb would have crept into her mouth, as a sign that earthly cares were swept aside, and that she had resigned herself to slumber; being a young woman of sweet and twenty, she snodded her head into the pillow, and fell fast asleep.

For over an hour she slept, and woke to find Cornelia leaning back in her chair watching her, while the book lay closed on her lap. For a moment she hardly recognised the face which she had always seen animated, self-confident, and defiant, but which was now softened into so sweet a tenderness. A lightning thought flashed through her mind that it was thus Cornelia would look, if ever in the time to come she watched by the bedside of her own child. She smiled lazily, and stretched out a caressing hand.

“Why, Cornelia, have you been sitting there all the time? How dull for you! How long have I been asleep?”

“It’s half after five, so we must be lively, if I am to get back in time to settle the old ladies, and get ready for dinner. Hustle now! I’ll help you to shed your own duds, and then pipe up for the transformation! That tea-gown’s the limit! I thought I knew the last thing there was to learn about clothes, but I wouldn’t be above going in for a course of too-ition from the woman who fixed those frills! This is going to be an historic occasion for you, my friend. Your sinful nature is kinder dead to the joys of frillies, but there’s going to be a big awakening! The woman isn’t born who could come out of that gown the same as she went in!” She lifted the blue serge skirt over Elma’s head, and surveyed the plain hem with tragic eyes. “It’s pretty hard luck to be born a woman instead of a man, but it softens it some to have a swirl of frills round one’s ankles! If I’d to poke around with a hem, I’d give up altogether.—Now, then, sit still where you are, while I fix your hair! I’m going to do it a way of my own, that will be more comfy for leaning up against cushions. If you don’t like it you can say so, but I guess you will.”

She brushed the soft light tresses to the top of Elma’s head, and arranged them skilfully in massed-up curls and loops. From time to time she retreated a step or two as if to study the effect, returning to heighten a curl, or loosen the sweep over the forehead. In reality she was reproducing, as nearly as possible, the coiffure of one of the beauties in miniature hanging on the drawing-room walls behind the couch on which Elma would probably pass the evening. It might chance that the eyes of mother or son would observe the likeness between the two girlish faces, a fact which could not but score in Elma’s favour!

When the dainty white robe was fastened, and each ribbon and lace patted into its place by skilful fingers, then, and not till then, Elma was allowed to regard herself in the glass. It was a startling revelation of her own beauty, but the predominant feeling was not elation, but distress. Accustomed as she was to a puritan-like simplicity, Elma felt almost shocked at her own changed appearance. The sweeping folds of the gown gave additional height to her figure, her neck looked like a round white pillar above the square of lace; the quaintly arranged tresses gave a touch of piquancy to her gentle features. An involuntary and quite impersonal admiration was followed by quick repentance.

“Cornelia, I can’t! I can’t go down like this! I daren’t do it. I look like an actress—so dressed up! Just as if I *wanted* to look nice!”

Cornelia sniffed eloquently.

“Well—don’t you?”

"Yes, but—but I don't like to *look* as if I did! Oh, Cornelia, couldn't I put on my own dress again, and do my hair the old way? I'd be so much happier!"

"The Grevilles wouldn't! You've got to remember that they are used to finery, and not to having young women sitting round in blue serge in the evening. It seems gaudy to you, but it's just dead, everyday-level to them, and won't raise a ripple. You look a Daisy, and I'm proud of you, and if you had a mite of feeling you'd say 'Thank you,' instead of finding fault after all my work!"

Elma wheeled round; surprised another glance of tender admiration, and held out impulsive hands.

"Cornelia, you are good! I *do* thank you; I know quite well that you—you are trying—I *do* love you, Cornelia!"

"Oh, shucks!" cried Cornelia, hastily. "Don't gush; I hate gush! Take my arm, and come along downstairs. Lean on it pretty heavily, mind. Your spirit's too much for your strength, and you are apt to forget that you are an invalid. You've got to keep a check on yourself, my dear, and remember that a nervous shock's a ticklish thing, and needs a lot of tending!"

Elma's head drooped; she twisted her fingers together, and glanced beneath the lashes at her friend's face—glanced timidly, questioningly, as it were, in dread.

Cornelia deliberately—*winked!*

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## Chapter Ten.

Geoffrey was lounging about in the hall as the two girls descended the wide staircase. His attitude gave the impression that he had been impatiently awaiting their advent, and, as he took in Elma's changed looks in one comprehensive sweep, his eyes brightened with an expression before which her lids drooped in embarrassment. He came forward eagerly to lead the way into the drawing-room, where Madame sat reading by an open window, and a sofa had been pulled forward and banked with cushions in readiness for the invalid. She smiled a welcome as the little procession entered the room, and looked on with an amused scrutiny while Cornelia shook out the cushions, skilfully altering their position so that the blue brocade should form the background for Elma's fair head. She did not attempt to rise, but her words were kindly enough, if a trifle patronising.

"Well, dear, and how are you now after your rest? We must take care of you, and not let you get overtired. Sure you are comfortable? You look too sweet in that gown! I shall never have the heart to wear it after you. Isn't it wicked that a woman is obliged to live on after her complexion has faded? I could bear any affliction better than watching myself growing uglier every day. ... I should have a little pillow tucked into your back. ... Sure you won't feel the draught? That's right! And you really must leave us, Miss Briskett? Couldn't possibly stay to dinner? I suppose it *would* be unkind! The dog-cart is waiting for you. I told them to have it round by seven. Geoffrey will drive you home, of course. After your adventure this afternoon we should not be happy to leave you to a groom. He'll see you safely to the door, and report to us on your safe arrival."

Geoffrey's face clouded involuntarily. He had mapped out a much more interesting programme for himself, deciding to slip upstairs and dress for dinner so early that he should be able to descend the moment that his mother was securely shut into her own room. Madame's evening toilette was a matter of three-quarters of an hour at least, during which time he would have Elma all to himself—to speak to, to look at, to make her look at him. Lovely creature! He had not realised how beautiful she was, and so sweet, and gentle, and shy. What a marvel to meet a *shy* girl in these days of loud-voiced, smoking, tailor-made women! A man may appreciate the society of a twentieth-century damsel whom he designates as a "rattling good sort," but he wants a womanly woman for his wife. Elma was womanliness personified—a sweet pink-and-white, softly-curved creature, whose eyes regarded the masculine creature with an unspoken tribute of homage. "You are so big!" they seemed to say; "I am so little! Oh, please be kind to me!" Inspired by that look, Geoffrey was capable of fighting dragons on her behalf!

And now he was consigned to drive home a tiresome American girl, who was remarkably well able to take care of herself! Mentally he fumed; outwardly, being a man of the world, he smiled, and murmured "Delighted!" with an imitation of enthusiasm which won Cornelia's admiration.

"One to you, Mr Greville! You played up real well," was the mental comment, as she dropped a kiss on Elma's brow and listened to her anxious messages.

"Tell mother not to be anxious. Tell her I'm not really ill—only silly and nervous. Tell her I shall soon be well—"

"That's all right, my dear. I'll cool her fevered brow. ... Your mother'll be a circumstance compared with Aunt Soph! I'll have to promise never to look at a horse again while I'm in this country." She turned towards Mrs Greville with easy self-possession.

"It's real good of you to send me back, and take such care of us both. Good-afternoon. So pleased to have met you!"

Madame extended her thin, ringed hand, laughing softly the while. As she had said, she loved to be amused, and this American girl was quite too ridiculously audacious! Actually one might have supposed that she believed herself to be speaking to an equal!

Cornelia and Geoffrey Greville passed along the hall, with its great oak fireplace filled in with branches of spreading beech, its decorations of tapestry, of armour, of stags' heads, of cases of stuffed birds. The ceiling was beamed with oak, the floor was polished to a dangerous brightness, and covered in the centre by an ancient Persian rug. Cornelia had never seen such an interior except as it is imitated on the stage. Her own tessellated, be-fountain entrance

hall in New York was as far removed from it on the one side, as on the other was the square of oil-cloth, decorated with a hat-stand and two mahogany chairs, which at The Nook was dignified by the same title. She admired, but admired with reservations. "Kinder mouldy!" summoned up the ultimate verdict.

Geoffrey moved moodily towards the doorway. Though bitterly annoyed at his mother's interference, he was too much of a gentleman to wreak his vengeance on the innocent cause of his exile. As a mitigation of the penance, it occurred to him that he might occupy the time of absence by talking of Elma since he might not talk to her; but Providence was merciful, and came to his aid at the eleventh hour. The inner door opened, and Captain Guest appeared upon the threshold, cap in hand, evidently returning from a solitary ramble, and by no means overjoyed to have arrived at such an inopportune moment. He bowed, murmured some inarticulate greeting, and would have passed by had not Geoffrey eagerly blocked the way. For the moment the claims of friendship were non-existent; he did not care whether Guest were pleased or annoyed; he was simply a means of escape, to be seized on without compunction.

"Halloa, here you are! Just the man I wanted," he cried genially. "You shall have the privilege of driving Miss Briskett home. I was going to take her myself, but I've got some rather—er—pressing business to attend to before dinner"—he chuckled mentally over the application of the words—"so I'll stand aside in your favour. We are not going to trust her out of our sight until she is delivered safely into her aunt's keeping. Awfully sorry, Miss Briskett, but we shall meet again! You'll come up to see Miss Ramsden, won't you? Do come! Come on Saturday—we could make up a game of tennis if she is fit enough by that time."

He helped Cornelia to her seat courteously, yet with an underlying haste which could not be concealed. Captain Guest gave him one look—a murderous look—and murmured, "Delighted, I'm shaw!" in tones of ice. Cornelia felt "ugly," and looked delightful; head erect, lips pursed, eyes a-flash.

"Just as mad as he can be, to be obliged to be civil to 'the girl' for a short half hour! Guess there's one or two, several sizes bigger than him, who would cross the ocean to-morrow for the chance! He's English—real English!—the sort that's fixed up with liquid prejudice for blood, and eye-glasses made to see nothing on earth but the British Empire. Rather skeery at the present moment at being set down beside a bold American hussy, with only a groom as chaperon! ... Well! I always was tender-hearted. I'll pile it on all I know, to fix him in his opinions. I'm made so's I ken't endoore to disappoint anyone in his expectations!"

She turned deliberately to stare at the silent figure by her side. Certainly he was a fine figure of a man! Her own countrymen who would have travelled so far as to take his place, would have to be giants if the "several sizes" bigger were to be taken in literal earnest. The lean cheek showed the square formation of the jaw, the lips were clean shaven, the eyes dark, deep-set, thickly lashed and browed, the only handsome feature in the face. Cornelia mentally pulled herself together, as Guest turned his head, and cast a fleeting glance at her beneath his drooping lids.

"I was sorry to hear that your friend is too ill to be moved. I imagined at the time that she was worse than you realised."

"She *thinks* she is, anyhow, and that's about as good as the real thing—perhaps better, where health's concerned. Some people don't need much to upset 'em—Elma's one! I guess there's never much snap to her!"

The dark brows arched expressively. "Really! I am afraid I hardly—er—understand the expression!"

"You wouldn't!" returned Cornelia, calmly. "It don't seem to flourish in this part of the country. At home we reckon no one *is* much use without it."

"So I have heard!" Captain Guest's understanding of the term seemed to have been more complete than he would acknowledge. "Our standards differ, however. 'Snap' may be a useful commodity in the business world, but one resents its intrusion into private life. The very name is objectionable in connection with a girl like Miss Ramsden—with any English girl!"

Cornelia curled her red lips.

"Yes, they flop; and you like 'em floppy! Kind of ivy round a stalwart oak, or a sweet, wayside rose. A m-o-oss rose!" No amount of description could convey the intonation which she threw into that short word. The "o" was lengthened indefinitely, giving a quaint, un-English effect to the word, which sounded at the same time incredibly full of suggestion. Guest flushed with annoyed understanding, even before Cornelia proceeded to enlarge. "The m-o-oss makes a nice, soft wadding all round, to keep the little buds safe and hidden. We use it quite a good deal at home for packing curios. *Dried* moss! It's apt to get a bit stale with keeping, don't you think?"

"No doubt; but even so it retains some of its fragrance. In its worst state I should be sorry to exchange it for"—it was now the Captain's turn to throw all his power of expression into one short word—"snap!"

Cornelia's laugh held a curious mingling of irritation and pleasure.

It was poor fun having a quarrel all to herself, and it whetted her appetite to find a combatant who was capable of "hitting back." She sat up very straight in her seat, tossing her head backward in quick, assertive little jerks, and clasping her bare hands on her lap. Guest glanced at her curiously from his point of vantage in the rear. She was like no other girl whom he had met, but somewhere, in pictured form, he must surely have seen such a face, for it struck some sleeping chord of memory. A fantasy perhaps of some Norse goddess or Flame Deity; a wild, weird head, painted in reds and whites, with wonderful shaded locks, and small white face aglow with the fire within. His lips twisted in an involuntary smile. Could anything be more aggressively unlike "the sweet m-o-oss rose" of which she had spoken?

"I guess if you go to the root of things, a man's picture of a woman is cut out to fit into his own niche! If he's very big himself, there's only a little corner left for her—a nookey little corner where the moss can grow, but the plant don't have much scope to spread. If he don't take much stock of himself, he kind-er stands back, and gives her the front place. Then she gets her chance, and shoots ahead!"

Guest laughed in his turn; an exasperating little laugh, eloquent of an immense superiority and disdain.

"You speak in an allegory—an allegory of English and American life. I am quite aware that with you the sexes have reversed positions, that the man has sunk into a money-making machine, who slaves so that his wife may spend, while the woman devotes her whole life to dress and frivolity—"

"Have you ever been in my country?"

Cornelia was brought up short and sharp by an unexpected assent. To disparage America was an unforgivable offence, and she was prepared to denounce the judgment of ignorance in words of flame. Her anger was not abated, but merely turned in another direction, by the discovery that it was not ignorance, but blindness which she had now to denounce—the blindness of the obtuse Englishman who had been granted a privilege which he was incapable of appreciating.

"Some people travel about with such a heap of prejudice as baggage that they might as well stay at home and be done with it. Englishmen pride themselves on being conservative, and if they've once gotten an idea into their heads, it takes more'n they'll ever see with their eyes to get it out. I guess you spent your time in my country seeing just exactly what you'd calculated on from the start. It's big enough to rear all sorts, and enlightened enough to hold 'em!"

"It is certainly very big," assented Guest, in a tone of colourless civility. Cornelia hated him for his indifference, his patronage, his thinly-veiled antagonism. She was accustomed to a surfeit of masculine attention, and cherished a complacent faith in her own fascinations. It was a new and disagreeable experience to meet a man who, so far from exhibiting the well-known symptoms of subjugation, was honestly anxious to avoid her society. To feel herself disliked; to be a bore to two men—the one eager to hand her over to his friend, the other furious at being so trapped—can the world contain a deeper degradation for feminine three-and-twenty? Cornelia's mood changed before it. The excitement which had tided her over the events of the afternoon died away, to be succeeded by a wave of sickening home-sickness. She was lonesome—she wanted her poppar! She hated this pokey place, and everyone in it. She guessed she'd take a cabin in the first boat and sail away home. ... Her lips quivered, and she blinked rapidly to suppress a threatening tear. She would rather shoot herself than cry before this patronising Englishman, but it was almost past endurance to play second fiddle all the afternoon, be snubbed on the way home, and look forward to an evening spent in propitiating two nervous old ladies!

"I don't get any bou-quets in this play!" soliloquised Cornelia, sadly. "'Far's I can see, there isn't a soul in Great Britain that cares a dump about me at the present moment, except, maybe, Aunt Soph, and she'd like me a heap better at a distance!" She sighed involuntarily, and Captain Guest, watching her from beneath his lowered lids, was visited by an uncomfortable suspicion that while criticising another, his own behaviour had not been above reproach. Now that the girl had lost her aggressive air, and looked tired and sad, the feminine element made its appeal. Arrogance gave place to sympathy, prejudice to self-reproach. ... She was only a little thing after all, and as slim as a reed.

Rapidly reviewing the incidents of the afternoon, he was as much surprised as shocked at the recollection of his own discourtesy. This stranger had overheard his frank declaration of dislike, had probably also seen the glance of reproach which he had cast upon Greville in the porch before starting out on this drive. Twice in a few hours had he overstepped the bounds of politeness, he, who flattered himself on presenting an unimpeachable exterior, whatever might be the inward emotions! The explanation of the lapse was a suddenly conceived prejudice at the moment of first meeting. The girl's jaunty self-possession had struck a false note, and he had labelled her as callous and selfish. Now, looking at her afresh, he realised that this was not the face of a cold-hearted woman. This girl could *fed!* She was feeling now—feeling something painful, depressing. His eyes fell once more on her ungloved hands; he noticed that she held the right wrist tightly grasped, and even as he did so memory flashed back a picture of her as she had stood above him on the bank, her hands held in the same strained position. Afterwards he marvelled at the accuracy of that brain picture, but for the moment concern overwhelmed every other feeling. The inquiry came in quick, almost boyish tones, strangely different from his previous utterances.

"I say! have you hurt your wrist? You are holding it as if it were painful."

Cornelia turned to see a face as altered as the voice, elevated her brows in involuntary surprise, and drawled an indifferent assent.

"I guess I ricked it, hanging on to those reins. It was pulled half out of the sockets."

"Didn't you have anything done for it at the house?"

"No."

"Or tell anyone about it?"

"No."

"But why not?"

"I never yelp!" said Cornelia, proudly. She tilted her chin, and her eyes sent out a golden flash. "There was enough of

that business going on without my joining in the chorus. If you're hurt, it don't mend it any to make a fuss."

Guest looked at her curiously.

"You certainly did not yelp! I thought you had escaped entirely, and that your friend had come in for all the knocking about. I'm awfully sorry. Sprains are beastly things. Look here, if you don't want to be crippled, it ought to be massaged at once! I'm knowing about sprains. Had an ankle cured in a couple of days by a Swedish fellow, which would have laid me up for weeks on the old methods. The great point is to keep the blood from congealing in the veins. Of course, it must be done in the right way, or it will do more harm than good. You set to work directly *above* the joint. Er—would you allow me?—might I show you for just a moment?"

The horse was ambling peacefully along a quiet lane, and as he spoke Captain Guest twisted the reins loosely round his own wrist and half held out his hands, then drew them back again in obvious embarrassment. The shyness was all on his own side, however, for Cornelia cried, "Why, suttently!" in frank response, and pulled back the loose lawn sleeve to leave her wrist more fully exposed.

She watched with keen interest while he rubbed upward with gentle pressure, increased gradually as she showed no sign of pain or shrinking.

"That's the way—upward, always upward. Follow the line of the blood vessels—you see!" He traced a fine blue line with the end of a big finger, while the groom rolled curious eyes from behind, rehearsing a dramatic recital in the servants' hall. "After that has been done once or twice, tackle the joint itself, and you'll be astonished at the effect. Is there anyone in the house who can do it for you? You could do a good deal for yourself, you know, if the worst comes to the worst. Like this—give me the left hand, and I'll show you how to work the joint itself!"

Cornelia edged round in her seat to adopt a more convenient position, and laid her hand in his with the simplicity of a child. Such a slip of a thing it looked lying on his big brown paw, soft and white, with carefully manicured nails—almond-shaped, transparent, faintly pink. Guest loved a pretty hand, and held theories of its value as an exponent of character. The future Mrs Guest might or might not be handsome, as Fate decreed, but it was inconceivable that he could ever marry a woman with red fingers, or bitten nails. A pure artistic delight possessed him at the sight of Cornelia's little hand, but the soft confident touch of it against his palm brought with it a thrill of something deeper. He gave his demonstration with a touch of awkwardness, but the girl herself was as placidly self-possessed as if he had been a maiden aunt buttoning up a glove. She put question after question, requested him to "show her again," and gripped his own wrist to prove that she had mastered the desired movements. A more business-like manner it was impossible to imagine. Guest doubted if another girl of his acquaintance would have shown such an utter absence of self-consciousness. It was admirable, of course, quite admirable, but— He took up the reins with a little rankle of disappointment mingling with his approval.

Barely a mile now remained to be traversed, as the horse was trotting up the long hill into Norton; at the top was the High Road, at the end of the High Road the gates leading into the park. If anything remained to be said, it would be wise to say it now, but Cornelia seemed to have nothing to say. She sat in erect, straight-backed fashion, her right hand lying on her knee, the fingers of the left rubbing softly up the arm, serenely oblivious of his presence. Guest cleared his throat once, cleared it again, cleared it a third time, but the words would not come. They passed through the lodge-gates and drew up before The Holt, where the groom stood ready to assist Cornelia to alight. Before Guest could throw down the reins she had jumped to the ground, and was standing facing him on the curb. The slanting rays of the afternoon sun fell on her as she stood, a slim white slip of a girl whom he could lift with one hand—a spirit as of tempered steel, which might bend, but never break.

"I thank you for your courtesy!" said Cornelia, clearly, as she inclined her head towards him in formal, old-world fashion.

Captain Guest watched her progress up the narrow path, biting hard at his lower lip. Courtesy! The word stung. The big man felt uncommonly small as he turned his horse and drove slowly home.

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## Chapter Eleven.

At the first shock of hearing of the accident, Mrs Ramsden's motherly anxiety swamped all other feeling. She forgot to disapprove of a woman who at sixty still wore a pad on her uncapped head, and lacy frills on her petticoat, in gratitude to the hostess who had extended hospitality to her ewe lamb. For the moment also, Geoffrey himself ceased to be a dangerous roué, and became a gallant rescuer, miraculously appearing on the scene of danger. She cried, and wanted to know how Elma looked; what Elma said; how Elma felt; what Elma had had to eat; if Elma's sheets had been aired; if Elma cried—poor darling! at being left behind? And Cornelia answered fully on all these points, not always, it is to be feared, with a strict regard to veracity, but with a praiseworthy desire to soothe, which was blessed with wonderful success. Mrs Ramsden dried her eyes, and opined that life was full of blessings, and that she ought to be thankful that things were no worse! There was a sweet young girl whom she had once known, who had both legs amputated, and died of gangrene, a month before she was to have been married. It was caused by a carriage accident, too, and now she came to think of it, the poor dear had just the same pink-and-white complexion as Elma herself.

"Well, I guess there's not much stump about Elma, this journey!" returned Cornelia, cheerily. "There's nothing to it but a little shock to the constitootion. Elma's constitootion is nervy. What she needs is re-pose. Perfect re-pose! If I were you, I'd send up a note to-morrow, and stay quietly at home. It would naturally upset her some to see you, and she'd recuperate quicker by herself."

But at this Mrs Ramsden drew herself up with a chilly dignity. She must certainly see her child. It was her duty to see

for herself how matters progressed. In the matter of removal, she must be guided by what she saw...

"Yes, 'um!" assented Cornelia, meekly.

She had said her say, and felt confident that Geoffrey Greville might now be trusted to play his part. As she walked along the few yards which separated The Holt from The Nook, she congratulated herself that the worst half of her explanations were over; but in this reckoning she was mistaken. Miss Briskett's displeasure was unsoftened by anxiety, and was, moreover, accentuated by the remembrance that all this trouble would have been averted if Cornelia had consented to accept Mrs Nevins' invitation to tea in a reasonable and respectful manner. The girl had refused to make herself amiable, had insisted upon driving a strange horse over strange roads, in the face of expressed disapproval, and had contrived to come to grief outside the very house of all others which she was most desired to avoid! Cornelia was flighty enough already; the only chance of keeping her in order was by introducing her to friends who, by their quiet decorum, would exercise a restraining effect on her demeanour. Symptoms of dissatisfaction had already set in—witness that same rejected tea—and this afternoon's experience had established a certain amount of intimacy, which would entail endless difficulties in the future.

Poor Miss Briskett, she was indeed sorely tried! With her own eyes she had beheld Cornelia driven up to the gate by a man who was even more dangerous than the young Squire himself, inasmuch as he was often a visitor in the Park for weeks at a time; his aunt being the proud possessor of The Towers, the largest and most imposing of the crescent houses. On the afternoon on which Cornelia's coming had first been discussed, she herself had remarked to Mrs Ramsden that the girl must be protected from an acquaintance with Captain Guest! It seemed almost too exasperating to be borne that she should have effected an introduction for herself within three short weeks of her arrival!

The spinster's sharp nose looked sharper than ever, her thin lips thinner, her grey eyes more cold and colourless. Cornelia looked from them to the steel trimmings on her dress—really and truly, one looked about as human as the other! The "lonesome" feeling gripped once more, and her thoughts flew longingly to "Poppar," away at the other side of two thousand miles of ocean.

"I feel kinder *left!*" was the expressive mental comment as the maid swept away the crumbs, placed the two fruit dishes and the decanter of port before her mistress, and noiselessly retired from the room. Miss Briskett had been clearing her throat in ominous fashion for the last ten minutes, and now that Mary's restraining presence was removed, she wasted no further time in preliminaries. "I think it is time that we came to an understanding, Cornelia," she began, in ice-cold accents. "If you remain under my roof you must give me your word to indulge in no more escapades like that of this afternoon! I gave my consent with much reluctance; or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that I was not asked for my consent at all; and now you see what the consequences have been!"

"I promise faithfully, Aunt Soph, that I'll never have a smash again, if I can help it! I'm not a bit more set on them than you are yourself, and I guess the mare was as innocent as a babe, so far's you're concerned. She wasn't deliberately setting out to annoy you, as you seem to imagine. I guess she needs more sympathy than blame!"

"Don't fence with words, Cornelia, please. I was not referring to the horse, and I have no intention of allowing you to run any more risks. I distinctly forbid you to take more carriage expeditions without a competent driver. I am responsible for your safety, and your father would blame me, if any harm happened to you while you are my guest. I acted against my judgment in allowing you to go alone to-day, but I shall not do so again. Do you clearly understand?"

Cornelia's golden eyes stared at her thoughtfully. An inherent sense of justice made her conscious that her aunt had right on her side, though she might have worded her decree in more conciliatory fashion. The reference to her father also had a softening effect. Poppar'd go crazy if he heard that his daughter had been in any sort of danger!...

"Well—" she said slowly. "It's a 'got-to,' I suppose! It would be playing it pretty low down, to land you with the worry of nursing me, and keeping Poppar quiet at the other end of the world. But you wouldn't expect me to drive about with one of those fool-creatures from the livery stable taking care of me, as if I were a kiddy? No, sir! I don't see myself coming down to *that* level yet awhile! We'd best get up some driving parties, with those men at the Manor. They seem to have lots of horses and carts and things hanging round, and I don't see as they could employ themselves better than in giving Elma and me a good time. I'll air the subject when I go up to inquire!"

Miss Briskett fairly leapt on her seat with horror and indignation. She began to speak, and spoke rapidly for the next three minutes, laying down a series of commandments to which Cornelia listened with bated breath.

Thou shalt not hold any communication with the Manor, nor with the people inhabiting the Manor; nor with the guest sojourning beneath the roof of the Manor. Thou shalt not associate with any men outside the circle of thy aunt's acquaintances. Thou shalt walk abroad by thine aunt's side, on thine own legs, and comport thyself discreetly, as behoves a young gentlewoman of good family. Thou shalt remember that thou art a self-invited guest, and conform to the rules of the establishment, or else shalt promptly return to the place from whence thou camest...

In a word, Miss Briskett lost her temper, and when a woman of mature years and grey hairs loses control of herself, and lets her tongue run amuck, it is a sorry spectacle. The flush on Cornelia's cheeks was not for her own humiliation, but for her aunt's. She lowered her lids, ashamed to look into the angry, twisted face.

"Yes, I understand," she replied quietly, in answer to the final question. "I guess I understand quite a lot."

"And you mean to obey?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then—



"No," drawled Cornelia, calmly. "I can't say as I do! Those people have been polite to me, and I'm bound to be civil in return. I never ran after any man that I know of, and I don't intend to begin, but when I *do* meet 'em, I'm going to be as pleasant as I know how. It's a pity, Aunt Soph, but you don't understand girls! I've not been reared on tea-parties and cribbage, and I tell you straight that I've just *got* to have a vent! You be wise not to try to shut me up, for I get pretty reckless if I'm thwarted."

"Cornelia, do you dare to threaten me?"

"No, Aunt Soph. I'm kind enough to warn you before it is too late!"

Cornelia rose as she spoke, and walked upstairs to the square, prosaic room, which seemed the only bit of "home" she possessed in the whole big map of Europe; sat herself down, and reviewed the situation.

Aunt Soph had not wanted her! The longing for a real heart-to-heart friendship had been on one side only; that was the first, and most petrifying revelation. She had travelled two thousand sea-sick miles to find herself an unwelcome guest, imprisoned within the four square walls of a nook-less Nook; bound fast in the trammels of old-world conventions. "My country, 'tis of thee, sw-e-et land of libertee!" murmured Cornelia, mournfully, beneath her breath. Two big tears rose in her golden eyes, and her lips quivered. Should she pack up, and sail for home forthwith? For a moment the temptation seemed irresistible, but only for a moment. Poppar would feel badly if his two nearest relations came to an open rupture; and besides, "When I make up my mind to do a thing, I get there—ev-er-y time!" said the girl, staunchly. "I guess it'll take more than four weeks of this country to daunt Cornelia E Briskett, if she's got her head set to stay. For one thing, I've taken in hand to start Elma Ramsden on the road to liberty, and there's going to be a fight before she's through. I'll have to stand by, and be ready with the drill. As for Aunt Soph, she's acted pretty meanly, letting me come along when she hated to have me, but for Poppar's sake I'll be as meek as I know how. I thought we were going to be friends, but she's such a back number she don't even remember how it felt to be a girl, and it's not a mite of use arguing. She thinks she knows better than I do!" Cornelia gurgled amused incredulity. "Well, it's as easy as pie to hev a little prank on my own account, and prank I *must*, if I'm to last out another three months in this secluded seminary. My constitootion's fed on excitement! I should wilt away without it. Poppar wouldn't like to have me wilt!" ... She sat gazing out of the window; gazing—gazing, while a slow smile curled the corners of her lips.

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## Chapter Twelve.

Two golden days! Summer sunshine, roses, lounging chairs set behind sheltering trees, grey eyes eloquent with unspoken vows; on every side beauty, and luxury, and sweet fostering care. Elma felt as if she had fallen asleep, and awakened in a fairyland more wonderful than her wildest dreams!

On the morning after the accident, Mrs Ramsden had duly chartered a fly, and driven to the Manor with intent to bring her daughter home without delay. During the night watches old dreads had revived; she shuddered at the thought of Elma left alone—poor, innocent darling!—with that terrible young man; pursed her lips at the recollection of Madame's frivolities, and decided that nothing but grimmest necessity should induce her to prolong the danger. She entered the Manor, a Spartan matron prepared to fight to the death for the rescue of her child, but behold, instead of a battlefield, there stretched before her eye a scene of pastoral simplicity, in which the most Puritan of critics could not have discovered an objectionable detail.

A wide, velvet lawn, shaded by a belt of grand old beeches; a deck chair placed in the most sheltered nook, on which Elma reclined against a bank of cushions, while beside her—marvellous and confounding sight!—sat Madame herself, turning the heel of a common domestic stocking, a mushroom hat hiding the objectionable pompadour. So far as the eye could reach there was not a man in sight, not so much as a whiff of tobacco smoke in the air! As the round black figure waddled across the lawn, Madame rose in gracious welcome, while Elma—Elma's heart began to beat with sickening rapidity, a mist swam before her eyes, and a lump swelled in her throat. She could not speak; her cheeks turned first red, and then white. She shook her head in response to her mother's greeting, and gasped as for breath.

The good lady was distracted at beholding such symptoms of collapse in her quiet, well-disciplined daughter, and Madame reproached herself in the conviction that the child was really much worse than she had imagined. As a matter of fact, the disease from which Elma was suffering was nothing more nor less than pure, unadulterated fright! Fright lest her mother should insist upon taking her home; lest she should be compelled to leave the Manor before Geoffrey returned from an excursion carefully timed to end just as his mother drove out to keep an appointment in the town! She was literally paralysed with fear. It seemed as if life itself hung on the issue of the next few moments. She shut her eyes and listened, with palpitating breath, to the conversation between the two ladies.

"Don't be alarmed! It is just seeing you that has upset her. A few minutes ago she was quite gay. Weren't you gay, dear? We have had such a happy little morning together. So long as she is absolutely quiet she seems quite well. But as you see, any excitement—" Madame gesticulated eloquently behind Elma's back. "Excitement prostrates you, doesn't it, dear? We must keep you quite a prisoner for the next few days!"

Mrs Ramsden sat down heavily on a wicker chair, folded her hands on her sloping lap, and sighed resignedly. Hardly a moment had elapsed since her arrival, but already her cause was lost. To subject Elma to the fatigue of returning home would be madness, when even an ordinary meeting had so disastrous effect; to refuse hospitality so charmingly offered would be ungracious in the extreme. There was nothing for it but to submit with a good grace, and submit she did, arranging to send up a box of clothing later in the afternoon, and promising to drive up again in a few days' time. "A few days!" She wanted to come every single morning, but Madame sweetly ignored her hints, and Elma, brightening into something wonderfully like her old self, declared that there was not the slightest cause for anxiety.

"I shall be *quite* well, mother dear!" she murmured affectionately as the poor lady stooped to kiss her before hurrying away, carefully mindful of the fare of the waiting fly. "*Quite* well, and—happy!" The pink flamed again at that last word, and Madame stroked the soft cheek caressingly.

"That child is a picture! I love to look at her," she said gushingly, as the two ladies recrossed the lawn. "How cruel of you to have kept her to yourself all this time. Really, do you know, I hardly realised that you *had* a daughter. But we are going to alter all that, aren't we? So sweet of you to trust her to me!"

Madame's conversation was a mixture of questions and exclamations, but she rarely paused for a reply. She prattled unceasingly as she saw her guest into her fly, and watched her drive down the avenue. Poor old Goody Ramsden; she was a worthy old dear! Wrapped up in that child; terrified to move her, yet terrified to leave her behind! Madame smiled in amused understanding of the good lady's scruples. What duckings and cacklings would go on in the parlours of the Park! What fears and forebodings would be experienced for the safety of the dove in the eagle's nest! Out of a pure spirit of bravado she was inclined to keep the child as long as possible; and the fact of Geoffrey's obvious admiration only strengthened her determination. It was dull for a young man with only his mother in the house. Let him amuse himself with this pretty girl. A few days flirtation would put him in good humour, and there was no danger of anything serious. Geoffrey never *was* serious. His flirtations could be counted by the score, but they held no connection with his future marriage. That must be a serious business arrangement, involving a name, a fortune, possibly a title; many tangible qualities would be demanded from the future mistress of the Manor.

Madame went through life regarding every person and thing from her own personal standpoint; apart from herself they ceased to interest. She would be affectionate and gushing to Elma Ramsden so long as the girl remained a guest under her roof; when she returned to The Holt she would promptly fade out of recollection. That a broken heart might be among the impedimenta which she would carry away with her, was a possibility which never once entered into the calculation. A typical Society woman! Verily, Goody Ramsden's fears were not built without a foundation!

An hour later Madame was driving out of her own gates, while Geoffrey was installed on her seat by the invalid's couch. A whole hour and a half still remained before the gong would sound the summons to luncheon; an hour and a half of solitude beneath the shadow of the trees! Last night there had been another *tête-à-tête* while Madame and Captain Guest played piquet at the end of the room; this morning there had been yet another, when Elma was first installed in the garden, and Madame was interviewing her staff. Astonishing how intimate two people can become in two long conversations! Marvellous in what unison two separate minds may move! Geoffrey and Elma seemed constantly to be discovering fresh subjects on which they thought alike, longed alike, hoped, grieved, joyed, failed and fought, in precisely the same interesting fashion! Each discovery was a fresh joy, a fresh surprise. "Do you really?" "Why, so do I!" "How strange it seems!" In the garden of Eden these surprises grow on every bush!

Elma's heart was hopelessly out of keeping, but conscience still fought feebly against temptation. She had been trained to consider no man worthy of her regard who did not attend Saint Nathaniel's Parish Church, eschew amusements, wear a blue ribbon in his coat, belong to the Anti-Tobacco League, and vote with the Conservative Party! In the watches of the night she had decided that it was her duty to use her influence to lead this dear worldling into better ways, and, to his credit be it said, the dear worldling appeared most eager to be reformed. He besought Miss Ramsden to "pitch into him"; declared that he knew, don't you know, that he was an "awful rotter"; but represented himself as waiting eagerly to be guided in the way in which he should go. How was he to begin?

Elma puckered her delicate eyebrows. She was wearing no hat, as it was more comfortable to recline against the cushions with uncovered head, but a fluffy white parasol belonging to her hostess was placed by her side, in case an obtrusive sunbeam penetrated the branches overhead. "I never know where the sun is going to move next. Men always do, don't they? I think it is so clever of them!" Madame had declared in her charming, inconsequent fashion as she fluttered away. Elma did not need the parasol as a shade, but it came in very usefully as a plaything in moments of embarrassment. There was one all-important subject weighing on her mind; she made a desperate plunge, and put it into words—

"You—you don't go to church!"

"Not very often, I admit. I'm afraid it is not much in my line."

"Don't you—believe in it?"

The vague question was yet sufficiently explicit. The Squire leant forward, his hands clasped between his knees, his forehead knitted into thoughtful lines.

"Er—yes! As a matter of fact, I *do*! Didn't once! At college, you know; got into a free-thinking set, and chucked the whole thing aside. But I've been about a good bit. I've seen countries where they go on that tack and it doesn't pay. The old way is the best. I know I'm a bit careless still. Men are, Miss Ramsden, when they have only themselves to think of. They get into the way of leaving that sort of thing to their mothers and sisters, but when a fellow starts for himself, it's different! I'm the master here, in name, but virtually it's my mother who runs the house. I don't interfere with her ways, but when I—er—*marry*, it will be different! Then I shall make a stand. Family prayers, and that sort of thing, don't you know. A man ought to set an example. You are quite right; you are always right! Bit shy at first, you know, and that sort of thing, but I'd do it; I promise you, I would! Turn up at church regularly every Sunday!"

"It would be your duty," said Elma, primly. She twirled the handle of the sunshade round and round, and strove womanfully to keep her thoughts fixed on the subject on hand, and away from that thrilling "when I marry." "But it isn't only *form*, you know," she added anxiously! "It's caring for it most of all, and putting it before everything else!"

Geoffrey gazed at her in a rapture of admiration. He loved her simplicity; he adored her earnestness. In his eyes she was a shining white angel sent down from heaven to be his guide through life. It needed all his self-control to keep back the words which were struggling for utterance, but the fear of frightening Elma by a premature declaration gave

him strength to resist.

They turned instead into a prayer, a sincere yet bargain-making prayer, like that of Jacob of old.

“Give me this woman!” cried the inner voice: “this one woman out of all the world, and I will vow in return my faith, my allegiance!” The most earnest vows are often offered in the least conventional language, and Geoffrey Greville was not a man to promise without intending to perform. There was a long, pregnant silence. Elma felt the presence of electricity in the air, and forced herself to return to the attack.

“And there are other things! ... You play bridge—”

“Certainly I do!”

“For money?”

“Shilling points.”

“What are ‘points’?”

Geoffrey laughed happily. This innocence sounded fascinating in his infatuated ears.

“That’s a little difficult to explain, isn’t it, if you don’t know anything about the game? Don’t you play cards at all?”

“Mother won’t have them in the house. We have ‘Quartettes,’ but they are different. ... Can you lose much at shilling points?”

“A fair amount, if you’re unlucky, but you can win it, too! I generally do win, as a matter of fact!”

“What is the most you ever lost in a night?”

Geoffrey grimaced expressively.

“Sixty pounds; but I was a fool, and doubled no trumps on a risky hand, on the chance of making the rubber. That was quite an exceptional drop!”

“I should hope so, indeed!” Elma’s horror was genuinely unassumed. “Sixty pounds! Why, it’s more than many a poor family has to live on all the year round! Think of all the good you could do with sixty pounds! It seems awful to lose it on cards in one evening!”

“The next sixty pounds I win, I’ll give to a workmen’s charity! Will that wipe away my offence?”

Elma was not at all sure that it would. Money won in unworthy fashion could never bring with it a blessing, according to Mrs Ramsden’s theories. She shook her head sadly, and ventured another question.

“You go to races, too, don’t you?”

“Whenever I get the chance.”

“You *like* going?”

“Love it! Why shouldn’t I? Finest thing in the world to see a good hard race! Wish I could keep a stud myself. I would, if I had the money. I must tell you the truth, you see, even if you are shocked!”

“Racecourses are very wicked places.”

“Ever seen one?”

“No.”

“Oh!”

They looked at each other and simultaneously burst into a laugh. They were young and in love; it was delightful to brush aside problematical difficulties, and give themselves over to enjoyment of the golden present. Elma forgot her usual somewhat prim reserve, and her laughter was like a chime of silver bells. It is a rare thing to bear a musical laugh. Geoffrey longed for nothing so much as to make her laugh again.

“I’m a born sportsman, Miss Ramsden, and I’ll never be anything else. I’d like to give up everything you dislike, but it’s no use swearing against one’s convictions. It’s not honest, and it doesn’t last, but I can promise you always to play straight, and to keep down the stakes so that I shall never run the risk of losing so much again.”

“Why can’t you play for nothing but just the fun of the game?”

“We call that playing for love! It’s rather dull—*in cards!*”

Elma twirled her parasol, and blushed to the eyes.

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## Chapter Thirteen.

Mrs Ramsden sent up a box to the Manor that same afternoon, containing a dark linen dress, a blue blouse, and black skirt for evening wear; a supply of underclothing, a grey Shetland shawl, and a flannel dressing-gown. An hour later, conveyed by special messenger, came a second box, accompanied by a note in Cornelia's handwriting. Elma was resting in her bedroom when it arrived. She opened it, and read as follows:—

“Dear Moss Rose,—I guess tight gowns are a bit worrying in hot weather, so I've gotten together a few waists and skirts that may aid your recovery, and send them along with my love, wishing you many happy returns of the day. If it isn't the right day, it ought to be, anyway! I always calculated to be here for your birthday, and I'm about tired waiting. If you send them back, I'll burn them, as sure as taxes, but I reckon you're too sweet to hurt my feelings. Put on the one with the ruckings! It's the duty of every woman to look her best in the eyes of—. What wonderful weather for the time of year!—Your friend, Cornelia.

“PS—There's quite a gale blowing round this corner!...”

“It *is* sweet of her, but I mustn't, I can't, I really *couldn't!*” was Elma's comment as she flushed with surprise and embarrassment. It was quite certain that she could not accept the gift, but there was no harm in just looking to see what the box contained! She crossed the room, cut the string, and unfolded the brown papers which covered the cardboard box; lifted fold after fold of tissue papers, and gasped in admiration of each treasure as it was revealed.

The daintiest of white lawn morning blouses, with skirt to match; a skirt and bodice of cream net marvellously rucked with ribbons; a blue muslin, afoam with flounces. All were fresh from the maker's hands, and, as Elma divined, had been selected from Cornelia's storehouse of garments, with careful regard to her own requirements. The “waists” would fit easily enough; the skirts—she shook out the muslin and held it against her own dress. Just a trifle short, perhaps, but not sufficiently so to spoil the effect. It was a *lovely* skirt! Elma edged away from the glass with a little jerk of the figure calculated to send the flounces in a swirl round her feet. For three-and-twenty years she had gone through life wearing plain hems, and as Cornelia predicted, the flounces went to her brain. After all, would it not be ungracious to reject so kindly a gift? Her real birthday fell in the middle of July, and Cornelia, being rich and generous, would naturally offer a gift on the occasion. To keep the blue muslin would be only anticipating the remembrance.

Yes! she *would* keep it, and return the other dresses, explaining that she really could not accept so much. But on second thoughts Cornelia had specially desired her to wear the net with the ruckings. ... Elma dropped the muslin on the bed, lifted the net blouse carefully from its wrappings, and held it before her to view the effect. Had mortal hands fashioned it, or had it dropped down ready-made from a fairyland where good spirits gathered pieces of cloud and sea-foam, and blew them together for the benefit of happy girlhood! Elma looked at herself in the glass; looked back at the blue glacé silk and black surah on the bed, and thanked Heaven for Cornelia Briskett! Indeed and indeed she would wear the “rucked net to-night, and look her best in the eyes of...” And she would send back the white lawn, and say—*What* should she say? Perhaps, after all, it would seem rather queer to keep the two more elaborate gowns, and send back the simplest. It might appear as if she did not consider it worthy of acceptance. She would keep them all; wear them all; enjoy them all; and oh, dear, sweet, kind, and most understanding Cornelia, if ever, ever, the time arrived when the gift could be returned, with what a full heart should it be offered!

Pen, ink, and paper lay ready on the writing-table. Elma seated herself, and wrote her thanks:—

“You dear Fairy-Godmother,—At first I thought I couldn't, but I've tried on all three, and I simply *can't* part from them. I don't know what mother will say, but I'm living just for the hour. I'm going to wear the net to-night, and if I look my best it will be *your* doing, and I'll never forget it! It's just wonderful up here, but I feel wicked, for really and truly I'm not ill? Captain Guest asked me a hundred questions about you last night, and I told him such nice things, Cornelia! I wonder sometimes whether you are a witch, and upset the cart on purpose, but of course there *was* the parrot! Madame is most kind, but I don't really *know* her a scrap better than the moment we arrived. She wears lovely clothes. If it were not for you I should have to go downstairs to-night in an odd blouse and skirt, and feel a *worm!* I hope you'll come up to inquire. Come soon! Everyone wants to see you again. With a hundred thanks.—Your loving friend, Elma.”

“Why am I a 'Moss Rose'?”

The note was slipped into the letter-box in the hall, as Elma went down to dinner that night, lovely to behold in the “rucked gown,” and the perusal of it next morning was one of the pleasantest episodes which Cornelia had known since her arrival. Truth to tell, she had felt many doubts as to the reception of her fineries, but the mental vision of Elma's tasteless home-made garments, against the background of the beautiful old Manor, had been distressing enough to overcome her scruples. She dimpled as she read, and laughed triumphantly. Things were going well; excellently well, and those dresses ought to exercise a distinctly hurrying effect. Four or five days—maybe a week. “My!” soliloquised Cornelia, happily; “I recollect one little misery who proposed to me at the end of an afternoon picnic. They're slower over here, but Mr Greville was pretty well started before this spell began, and if he's the man I take him for, he won't last out a whole week with Elma among the roses. Then the fun will begin! Sakes alive, what a flare-up! And how will the 'Moss Rose' stand pickling? That's where I come to a full stop. I can't surmise one mite which way she'll turn; but she's got to reckon with Cornelia E Briskett, if she caves in.”

Miss Briskett did not vouchsafe any inquiry as to the contents of the letter which had afforded such obvious satisfaction. She had probably recognised Elma's writing on the envelope, but made no inquiries as to her progress. Relationships between the aunt and niece were still a trifle strained; that is to say, they were strained on Miss Briskett's side; Cornelia's knack of relapsing into her natural manner on the very heels of a heated altercation seemed somehow an additional offence, since it placed one under the imputation of being sulky, whereas, of course, one was exhibiting only a dignified reserve!

Miss Briskett set forth on her morning's shopping expedition without requesting her niece to accompany her, an omission which she fondly hoped would be taken to heart; but the hardened criminal, regarding the retreating figure

from behind the curtains, simply ejaculated, "Praise the Fates!" swung her feet on to the sofa, and settled herself to the enjoyment of a novel hired from the circulating library round the corner. For a solid hour she read on undisturbed, then the door opened, and Mason entered, carrying a telegram upon a silver salver.

"For you, miss. The boy is waiting for an answer."

Cornelia tore open the envelope with the haste of one separated far from her dearest, took in the contents in a lightning glance, sighed with relief, and slowly broke into a smile.

"Well—!" ... she drawled thoughtfully; "Well—! ... Yes, there is an answer, Mason. Give me a pencil from that rack!" She scribbled two or three words; copied an address, and handed it back eagerly.

"There! give that to the boy—and see here, Mason, I shall want some lunch ready by half after twelve. Send Mury right along to my room. I'm going away!"

Mason's chin dropped in dismay, but she was too well-trained an automaton to put her feelings into words. She rustled starchily from the room, to give the dread message to Mary, who promptly flew upstairs, voluble with distress.

"You never mean to say that you are going to leave us, Miss Cornelia? Why, you've only just come! I thought it was to be three months, at the least. You're never going so soon?"

"Only for a few days. I'll be back again, to plague you, by the end of next week. Don't you want me to go, Mury?"

Mary shook her head vigorously.

"I'd like to keep you for ever! The house isn't the same place since you came. I was saying to my friend only last Sunday that I couldn't bear to think of you leaving. Couldn't you find a nice young gentleman, and settle down in England for good? I'd come and live with you! I wouldn't ask anything better than to live with you all my days."

"Mury, Mury! what about the friend? What would he say to such desertion?"

Mary's grimace expressed a lively disregard of the friend's sufferings.

"I don't know how it is, but I think a heap more of you nor I do of him," she confessed candidly. "I'd come fast enough, if you gave me the chance. There's lots of good-looking young gentlemen in England, Miss Cornelia!"

"Is that so? I hope I'll meet quite a number of them, then; but I couldn't settle down out of my own country, Mury! You'll hev to cross the ocean if you want to tend my house. We'll speak about that another day; just now we've got to hustle round and get my clothes packed in the next hef hour. Just the dandiest things I've got. I'm going to have a real gay time in a hotel in London, Mury, with some friends from home, so I must be as smart as I know how. ... Get out the big dress basket, and we'll hold a Selection Committee right here on the bed."

Mary set to work, unable, despite depression, to restrain her interest in the work on hand. The big boxes were dragged into the middle of the room; bed, chairs, and sofas were strewn with garments, until the room presented the appearance of a general drapery establishment. Cornelia selected and directed, Mary carefully folded up skirts, and laid them in the long shallow shelves. In the height of the confusion the door opened, and Miss Briskett entered with hasty step. Signs of agitation were visible on her features, an agitation which was increased by the sight of the dishevelled room. In a lightning glance she took in the half-filled trunks, the trim travelling costume spread over the chair by the dressing-table, and a gleam of something strangely like fear shone out of the cold grey eyes. Cornelia had no difficulty in understanding that look. Aunt Soph was afraid she had pulled the rope just a trifle too tight, and that it was snapping before her eyes; she was picturing a flight back to America, and envisaging her brother's disappointment and wrath. Out of the abundance of her own content the girl vouchsafed a generous compassion.

"Yes, I'm off, Aunt Soph! My friends, the Moffatts, are putting up at the Ritz for a week, and want to have me come and fly round with them. They are going to meet me at four o'clock this afternoon, to be ready for a theatre to-night. I've got to be off at once. Mason's getting ready some lunch."

Miss Briskett stood severely erect, considering the situation. Now that the great anxiety was removed, the former irritation revived.

"And pray, who are the Moffatts? I must know something more about them before I can give my consent to this visit!"

Cornelia handed a pile of cardboard boxes into Mary's hands.

"Take that hat-box downstairs, and pack these on the tray. Don't muss them about! Then you can come back to finish off."

She waited until the door was safely closed, then faced her aunt across the bed. "I'm pleased to answer your questions as well as I know how. The Moffatts are—the Moffatts! I guess that's about all their family history, so far as I'm concerned. They came over with me, and Mrs Moffatt was real kind looking after me when I first came on deck, and was feeling pretty cheap. We saw quite a good deal of each other after that, and she said she'd love to have me do the sights with her sometime. She was going straight through to Paris, to get fixed up with clothes. Now it seems she's back in London. I gave her my address, and she wires me to come."

"You spoke of 'the Moffatts.' Who are the other members of the party?"

"There's a husband, of course, but he's not much account, except to pay the bills. He must be pretty cashy, for she has everything she wants, but it gets on her nerves having him poking round all the while. That's one reason why she

wants me. I could always keep him quiet!”

The complacent gurgle, the jaunty tilt of the head were as fuel to the spinster’s indignation. She pressed her lips tightly together before putting the final question.

“And your father knows nothing—nothing whatever of these people?”

“Well, I guess I may have mentioned their names. He didn’t know anything about them before that.”

“And you propose to stay at a London hotel with the casual acquaintances of a few days? You are mad! I cannot possibly allow it. You must wire at once to say that you are unable to accept.”

Cornelia stood silently erect. Her chief personal characteristic was that air of hot-house fragility so often seen in American girls, but in that silence her chin squared, her lips set, the delicate brows contracted in a beetling frown. It was no longer the face of a girl of two-and-twenty which confronted the spinster across the bed; it was the face of Edward B Briskett, the financier who had twice over piled up great fortunes by sheer force and determination.

“Now see here, Aunt Soph,” said Cornelia, clearly; “this is where you and I have got to come to an understanding. I’ve been used to going my own way ever since I was short-coated, and it wasn’t hankering to be put back into leading-strings that brought me across the ocean. Poppar trusts me, and that’s enough for me. You’ve got a right to boss your own home, but where I’m concerned your authority don’t spread one inch beyond the gate. If I decide to accept an invitation, it’s on my own responsibility, and no matter what happens, *you* won’t be blamed! I’ve decided to leave this at one twenty-five, and I’m *going* to leave, if I have to jump out of the window to get away! Now, that’s straight, and we know where we are!”

“I shall write to your father to-night, and tell him that you have gone in defiance of my wishes.”

“I guess it’s the best thing you can do. Poppar’ll cable back: ‘*Give Corney her head; It’s screwed on pretty straight!*’ and you’ll feel easier in your mind.” She paused a moment, her features softened into a smile. Despite the force of her words, there had throughout been no trace of ill-nature in her voice. Now she drew slowly nearer her aunt, holding out her pretty, white hands in ingratiating appeal.

“See here, Aunt Soph, don’t be mad! I’m sorry you take it like this, for I’ve a feeling that it’s just about the best thing that could happen to both of us, for me to clear out for a spell just now. We’ve been a bit fratchetty this last week; gotten on each other’s nerves somehow—but when I come back we can make a fresh start. In America, girls have more liberty than over here; but there’s not a mite of reason why we should quarrel over it. You’re my own Poppar’s sister, and I came quite a good way to see you. It’s a pity if we ken’t pull it off for the next few months. Don’t you want to kiss me, and wish me a real good time?”

Miss Briskett drew back coldly, but the little hands clasped her shoulder, the young face pressed nearer and nearer. Looking down from her superior stature, the girl’s likeness to her father was once more strikingly apparent; but it was not the man she recalled, but the dearer memory of the Baby Edward of long ago, whose clear child’s eyes had seen in “Sister” the most marvellous of created things. As on a former occasion, the remembrance was more powerful than words. Long years of solitary confinement had hardened the spinster’s heart beyond the possibility of a gracious capitulation, but at least she submitted to the girl’s embrace, and made no further objections to the proposed journey.

On the whole, Cornelia felt that she had scored a victory.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

Cornelia booked a first-class return to town, scattered half-crowns broadcast among the astonished porters, ensconced herself in a corner of an empty carriage, and prepared to enjoy the journey. She did not purchase any magazines at the bookstall; the only child of a millionaire need not trouble about insurance coupons, and at two-and-twenty life is more interesting than fiction. Cornelia guessed she’d heaps more to think about than would occupy a pokey little journey of from two or three hours. Just to think how things changed from day to day! Yesterday she had supposed herself dumped right-down in Norton Park for a solid three months, and to-day here she was full chase for London, with the prospect of a week, crammed full of frivolity and amusement!

She gurgled to herself in much contentment. Aunt Soph had kissed her, or, at least, submitted to be kissed; Elma was engaged in playing the part of Eve in flounced blue muslin, to an Adam in a flannel suit, in a particularly well-mown Garden of Eden. She could therefore be happy in her mind concerning those who were left behind, and she had never yet doubted her own ability to take care of herself. She smoothed the wrinkles on her long suede gloves, flicked the dust off the ridiculous points of her “high shoes,” and sighed impatiently. She and her baggage were safely aboard. Why couldn’t that old engine hustle up and start?

Cornelia rose to her feet, and thrust her head out of the open window. There was only one passenger approaching along the deserted platform, and as fate would have it, he had reached a spot but a couple of yards away, so that the sudden appearance of the girl’s head through the window was followed by simultaneous exclamations of astonishment. Exclamations of recognition, too, for the new-comer was none other than Captain Guest himself, most obviously equipped for town.

“Miss Briskett—is that you?”

“Mussy, what a turn you gave me! Who’d have dreamt of meeting you here?”

"Are you going up to town?"

"I am! Are you?"

"I am! Do you prefer to travel alone? If not, may I come in?"

"Why, suddenly!" Cornelia was not yet quite sure whether she were annoyed or pleased by the encounter, but on the whole the agreeable element predominated. She was of a gregarious nature, and at any time preferred to talk, rather than remain silent. After a month spent in a strictly feminine household, the society of a male man was an agreeable novelty. Moreover—sweet triumph to a daughter of Eve!—half an hour's *tête-à-tête* on the drive home from the Manor had apparently made short work of the Captain's preconceived dislike, since he was so anxious to repeat the dose! Cornelia smiled; the naughty, little smile of a spider who welcomes a fly into his net.

Another minute, and the train was moving lowly out of the station, while the two young people continued their cross-examination, confronting each other from their separate corners.

"This is an unexpected visit, is it not? I understood from Miss Ramsden that she expected you to call at the Manor to-day or to-morrow."

(Cornelia scored a point against him, for his own desertion, in the face of so interesting a prospect!)

"Vury unexpected! I got a wire from a friend and came off within two hours. I understood from Mrs Greville that *you* were making quite a good stay?"

Guest grimaced eloquently.

"I was—but—circumstances alter cases! To tell you the honest truth, Miss Briskett, I'm just a bit fed up with playing gooseberry by day, and piquet (with Madame!) by night, and the idea of spending a few days at the club presented itself as an agreeable novelty. My friends are almost all in town just now, and there is a good deal going on. I generally put in a week or so of the season, so I thought I might as well clear out at once. They don't want me here!"

"I don't know about that," returned Cornelia, thoughtfully. "What about Madame? *Someone's* got to keep her occupied! What's to happen to her in the evenings now? There'll be nothing for it but a three-handed game, and that's the limit! If you'd been a kind, self-sacrificing friend, you'd have stayed on, and worked that piquet for all you were worth!"

"But I'm not self-sacrificing, you see!" Captain Guest explained, and in truth he did not look it. Cornelia's glance took in the magnificent proportions of the man, the indefinable air of birth and breeding, the faultless toilette; the strong, dark features. To one and all she paid a tribute of admiration, but the expression on the face was of concentrated self-sufficiency. At this point admiration stopped dead, to be replaced by an uneasy dread. Was Geoffrey Greville, even as his friend, frankly indifferent to everything but his own amusement, and if so, what of poor Elma and her dream? It was an awful reflection that in such a case she herself would be largely responsible for thrusting Elma into danger. Her expression clouded, and she stared through the window with unseeing eyes. Captain Guest's words had been so exceedingly plain that she had not affected to misunderstand their meaning, and the ice once broken, she was glad of the opportunity of solving her doubts.

"You know Mr Greville very well. Is he—a flirt?"

Captain Guest flashed a glance at her; a rapid, understanding glance.

"He has been," he replied quietly. "A desperate flirt; but—he is not flirting now!"

"You think—"

"I'm sure!"

Cornelia clasped her hands with a sigh of relief.

"Then—?"

"The Deluge!"

"You mean—?"

"He can't marry her, of course! She's a lovely girl, and everything that's nice, and good, and that kind of thing, but—not at all the kind of girl he ought to marry."

"Ought he to marry someone hideous then, with an ugly temper? Poor fellow! Why?"

"There's no necessity to be hideous, that I know of, though as a matter of fact he probably won't find a girl suitable as to means and position, who is anything like so attractive, personally, as Miss Ramsden. Greville is hardly his own master, Miss Briskett. He is not a rich man, and he has the place to think of. Besides, there's Madame to consider. Madame belongs to a noble house, and has high ideas for her son."

"Is it the custom over here, for the mommas to choose wives for their sons? I don't know much about Mr Greville, but from the look of him I shouldn't suppose he was one of that sort. He has a kind of an air as if he'd want a lot of moving, once he got his head set! If he really cares—"

Captain Guest shrugged expressively.

"Oh, for the moment, of course, it's a case of 'all for love, and the world well lost,' but in a few days' time Miss Ramsden will return home; they will drop out of each other's lives, and then prudence will come to the fore. There's a girl whom he has known for years, who is built for him all the way round. I don't say he'll like it so much, but he'll end by marrying her like a good boy."

"By marrying her money, you mean to say? I see, we Americans aren't the only mercenary nation in the world, though we get the credit for it sometimes. Well! I'll wait a while, before I judge. There comes a time in most men's lives when they forget their fine principles, and see just one thing ahead, *and they've got to have it!* Everything else goes down like ninepins, even if it's a real stately old mother, with her hair fixed-up like Marie Antoinette. We'll wait and see if that time comes along for Mr Greville!"

Guest's lip twitched with amusement.

"You seem to be very experienced on the subject."

"I am so. I've seen quite a good deal of life," said Cornelia, with the air of a female Methuselah. She did not smirk nor giggle at the insinuation, but accepted it placidly as a matter of course, an occurrence of everyday happening.

Guest studied her critically, as she gazed out of the window. Was she plain, or beautiful? It was difficult to say. The colourless complexion, and sharply pointed nose were serious blemishes, but the mouth was exquisite, and the hair a marvel. How Rossetti would have gloried in painting it, unbound, with the great red-gold waves floating over her shoulders! The eyes were good, too, despite their unusual colour—the colour of a tawny old sherry!

As though attracted by his scrutiny, Cornelia turned her head, and let the golden eyes dwell thoughtfully upon his face.

"Does Mr Greville do anything?" she inquired. "Has he any sort of occupation in life?"

"He has a certain amount of business in connection with the property, but the agent does most of that. He hunts, of course, and shoots—he's a capital shot—and fishes at odd times. All the ordinary things that a man does."

"Is that so? They wouldn't be ordinary with us. I like a man to work. *You've* got to work hard, I suppose? You're a soldier."

The quick pucker of lips and brows were almost startlingly eloquent of pain.

"Not now! I was."

"You retired?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Rupert Guest looked across the carriage in silence. At any time he was haughtily resentful of curiosity; but on this subject most of all he could not endure to speak with his most intimate friends. His first impulse was to ignore the question, but as he met Cornelia's steady eyes that impulse underwent an extraordinary reversion. Incredible as it might appear, he became conscious that it was not only possible that he could tell this girl, this stranger, the hidden sorrow of his life, but that he actually wished to tell it! He wanted to hear what she would say; to see how she would look. Those childlike eyes would look very beautiful, softened with the light of sympathy and consolation. He wanted to see that light shining for his sake.

"It's a long story," he began slowly, "I don't talk of it more than I can help, but I'll tell you, if you care to hear it. I come of a race of soldiers: it never entered my head that I could be anything else. My father was in the Lancers; he died before I left Sandhurst, but my mother managed to allow me fifteen hundred a year, and I joined my father's regiment. I was lucky as things go; went through two engagements before I was thirty; gained distinction at Omdurman. At home I had a nailing good time: Adjutant of the regiment. We had the jolliest mess! I don't think a man ever lived who enjoyed his life more. There was lots of play, but I loved the work too, and studied hard, at every branch of the profession. I had the credit of being one of the best all-round men in the service." He laughed; a hard, sore-hearted laugh. "I can say that now without reproach, for it belongs to another life. ... Then—my mother died! She had been living beyond her income, and there were all the legal expenses to face; selling up at a loss; giving the girls their share. She had made a special push to keep me in the old regiment; but in the end it came down to this, that in all, there was barely five hundred a year for me. It was a big blow, but there was nothing for it but to send in my resignation."

"Why?"

"One can't be an officer in a crack cavalry regiment with only five hundred a year beyond his pay, Miss Briskett. It can't be done. There wasn't one of my subs, who had less than eight hundred."

"Don't you get any pay at all in your army then?"

"Certainly; about enough to pay the mess bills, and perhaps the changes of kit. The uniform costs several hundreds to start with, and those fools at the War Office are everlastingly ordering senseless alterations."

"Yes; but—I don't understand! If the pay is enough for your keep, why do you need such a heap more to get along? Where does all the expense come in?"



Guest knitted his brows in momentary embarrassment.

"Well, of course, there are certain things that a man must do to live up to his position. He must entertain; he must hunt; he must play polo. It comes cheaper to him than ordinary men, for he has the use of the regimental stables; but still, things run up. It's astonishing how they *do* run up! There are a hundred things that are *expected* of him, and there's no getting away from them."

"Isn't he expected first thing of all to serve his country?"

"That is, of course!" Guest raised his head proudly. "I have already explained that I *had* served her."

"Wouldn't they let you go on then, because you couldn't cut a dash?"

"*Let* me! There wasn't a man in the mess who didn't beg me to stay on! The Duke sent for me, and argued for half an hour. He promised me a staff appointment. He said some awfully decent things about my past services. I was glad of that... I said, 'It's no good, sir, I can't face the prospect of being Colonel of the regiment, and not being able to afford as much as my own subs.' We went over it again and again, and he lost his temper at last and called me a fool, but I stuck to it—"

Cornelia drew a sharp breath of excitement.

"You *did* resign—for money? In spite of all! For only that?"

"It's a very big 'only,' Miss Briskett. You don't know how it feels to have your income suddenly reduced by two-thirds."

"Oh, don't I just! I know how it feels to have it wiped clean away. I guess my Poppar's dropped about as much in one slump as any man in the States!" cried Cornelia, with the true American's pride in size, be it for good or ill. She did not feel it necessary to state that the lost fortune had been more than retrieved, for one of the very few points on which she found herself in complete agreement with her aunt, was the suppression of her own wealth. She had no wish to be judged from a monetary standpoint, and Poppar's fame had not travelled across the ocean. He was just an ordinary everyday millionaire, with a modest little income of from three to four hundred a day; not a real, genuine high-flyer, with a thousand an hour!

"I had to give up my frills and fixings, but I held on like grim death to the things that mattered.—I guess there's something wrong about your army, if a man's got to have a fortune before he can be an officer!"

"A good many people are with you there, Miss Briskett, but unfortunately that does not alter the fact."

"Then—what did you do after that?"

"Cleared out! I sold my uniform for eighty pounds!"—he laughed again, the same sore laugh—"and gave my orderly about a dozen suits of ordinary clothes. The only thing I kept was my sword. I had ten swords hung on my walls, used by ten generations in succession—I couldn't give that up. ... An old chum was going out ranching to the wildest part of California. He asked me to come with him, and I jumped at it. I wanted to get out of the country—away from it all. If I'd seen the regiment riding through the streets, I should have gone mad! ... We sailed within a few weeks..."

"*California!*" Cornelia's face was eloquent with meaning. She had seen a regiment of Lancers riding through the streets of London on the one day which she had spent in the metropolis; had stood to stare open-mouthed, even as the crowd who thronged the pavement. She recalled the figure of the officer, a gorgeous, mediaeval knight, impenetrably lifeless, sitting astride his high horse like a figure of bronze; a glimpse of haughty, set features visible between cap and chin-strap. Outwardly immovable, indifferent; but within!—ah! within, beyond a doubt, a swelling pride in himself, in his men, in the noble animals which bore them; in the consciousness that every day the pageant attracted the same meed of admiration; pride in the consciousness that he represented his King, his Empire, the power of the sword! Cornelia, a stranger and a Republican, had thrilled at the sight of the gallant Lancers, and—she had visited the wilds of California also, and had received hospitality at a lonely ranch! There was a husky note in her voice as she spoke again.

"How long were you there?"

"Three years."

"Did you—hate it very much?"

The laugh this time was more strangled than before.

"Twice over I came within an inch of shooting myself! We were twenty miles from the nearest neighbour. My friend went his way; I went mine. For days together we hardly exchanged a word. There was nothing but the great stretch of land, and the Rockies in the distance. In time one gets to think them beautiful, but at first... I used to sit and think of home, and the regiment. It was *always* with me. I used to say to myself: 'Now they are at mess—Now the horses are coming out of the stables—Now they are turning out for polo!' I could hear the drum, and the reveille, and the last post. ... As clearly as in the barracks at home, I heard them!..."

He stopped short, turning his eyes from the window to look at Cornelia's face. It was distorted, quivering, with emotion; her hands were clasped together, and down her cheek rolled two tear-drops, unashamed. He turned sharply aside, and for some moments neither spoke. Cornelia was seeing, as in a picture, the lonely ranch, with the solitary figure, sitting with his face towards the East, thinking, thinking. ... Guest was reflecting with amaze on the strange antic of fate, which ordained that it should be in the eyes of this Yankee stranger that he should see the first woman's

tears shed on his behalf! She cried like a child; simply, involuntarily, without thought of appearance; the tears rising from a pure well of sympathy. To the end of his life he would bless her for those tears!

The train slackened and drew up at a country station. A stout, elderly lady approached the carriage, glanced from one to the other of the two occupants, and hastily moved on. Cornelia smiled, with the tears wet on her lashes. Again the wheels began to move, and Guest said shortly—

“Thank you for your sympathy! I had a feeling that you would understand—that’s why I told you. It’s not a story that I often tell to strangers, as you may guess.”

“My, yes, I sympathise; I should just think I do. I know what even our own people suffer sometimes away out West; but I don’t *understand*,” said Cornelia, firmly. “I don’t understand—one—little—bit! There’s more to soldiering than riding through the streets, looking fine and large, and gotten up like a show. I love to see it. We profess to laugh at forms and ceremonies, but we love them just the same as anybody else, but it was your *country* you’d promise to serve! For better or worse you allowed you were sworn to serve her. You had risked your life for her; I reckon you had shed your blood. There was just one thing you wouldn’t sacrifice—your own pride! You were thinking of *yourself* when you sent in that resignation, Captain Guest! You saw yourself sitting looking out of the window, and seeing the boys riding off to their sports, and leaving you behind. You cared more for that, than the thought that England might need you!”

“You hit hard, Miss Briskett.”

“I hit straight. I know just how you’ve suffered. Seems to me I’m going to remember all my life how you sat in that ranch and heard the last post; but if I’d been in your place, if America had wanted me”—her small, white face lit up with a very ecstasy of emotion—“I’d have stayed at my post, *if I’d had to sweep the floors to do it!*”

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## Chapter Fifteen.

The moment of tension passed, and the strain relaxed. Captain Guest stoutly defended his position, and Cornelia vouchsafed a generous sympathy, while not budging an inch from her ultimate decision. She disapproved, but she had wept; the tears had rolled unchecked down her cheeks on his behalf. After that they could no longer be mere, casual acquaintances.

By the end of the first hour they had left the personal element behind, and were chatting busily about a dozen varying subjects—the English landscape; Trusts; Free Trade; Miss Alice Roosevelt; chafing dishes, and the London season. Cornelia had a cut-and-dried opinion on each, and was satisfied that every one who did not agree with her was a “back number,” but her arguments and illustrations were so apt and humorous, that Guest was abundantly entertained. Throughout the entire journey their *tête-à-tête* was uninterrupted, for though several passengers approached the carriage with intent to enter, one and all followed the example of the stout lady, and dropped the handle at sight of the two occupants. The third time that this interesting little pantomime was enacted Cornelia laughed aloud, and cried serenely—

“Guess they think we’re a honeymoon couple; they’re so scared of getting in beside us!”

Her colour showed not the faintest variation as she spoke. It was Guest who grew hot and embarrassed, and was at a loss how to reply. He need not have troubled himself, however, for Cornelia continued her exposition touching the superiority of American everything, over the miserable imitations of other countries, with hardly as much as a comma’s pause for breath.

Guest sat back in his corner, looking at her with every appearance of attention, but in reality his thoughts were engaged in following a bewildering suggestion.

“They think we are a honeymoon couple.” ... Suppose—it was folly, of course, but for one moment, *suppose they were!* He would be looking at his wife! She would smile across at him, and call him fond, silly little names. He would kiss her—she had beautiful lips to kiss! and hold her hand—it was a soft little hand to hold, and tease her about her shaded hair, and her sharp little nose, and her ridiculous, pointed shoes! They would get out at the terminus, but instead of bidding each other a polite good-bye, would drive off together in a fly, discussing joint plans for the evening. Later on they would have dinner at a little table in the great dining-hall of the hotel, criticising their neighbours, and laughing at their peculiarities. In the theatre they would whisper together, and when the curtain went up on the heels of a critical moment, he would see the tear-drops shining once more on her lashes.—It was a lonely business going off to a man’s club, where nobody wanted you, or cared a brass farthing whether you came or went. Not that for a moment he wished to be married—least of all to Cornelia Briskett. There were a dozen things about her which jarred on his nerves, and offended his ideas of good taste. He objected to her accent, her unconventional expressions, her little tricks of manner; while on almost every subject her point of view appeared to be diametrically opposed to his own. In her company he would be often jarred, annoyed, and discomfited, but of a certainty he would never be bored! Rapidly reviewing his life for the last few years, it appeared to Guest that he had existed in a chronic state of boredom. If “we were a honeymoon couple,” that dreariness at least would come to an end!

He looked at Cornelia’s ungloved left hand resting upon the dark cushions—she wore a ring, a wide, flat band of gold, with one fine diamond standing far out, in a claw setting. American ladies affect solitaire rings, as tokens of betrothal—did this mean that the honeymooning question was already settled? If it were so, the fact would account for the girl’s absence of embarrassment in his own company; all the same, he did not believe it, for there was in her manner a calm, virginal composure, an absence of sentimentality, which seemed to denote that the citadel had not yet been stormed.

Cornelia noted his gaze, without in the least guessing its meaning.

"It was the other wrist that was sprained— The right one!" she said, holding it up as she spoke, and carefully moving it to and fro. "It's heaps better, thanks to you. I set Mury to rub it, according to instructions, and—there you are! It's most as well as the other."

"Ready to shake hands, now?"

"Oh, yes."

"Mentally, as well as physically?"

The white teeth showed in a smile of comprehension.

"I—guess so! I never was one to harbour animosity."

"I am glad of that! You bade me such a frigid good-bye on Thursday afternoon that I was afraid you had taken a violent dislike to me."

"My stars and stripes, that's pretty calm! What about *you*, I beg to ask?" Cornelia rolled indignant eyes to the hanging lamp. "I didn't hev to think; I *heard* from your own lips what you thought about *me*! I couldn't rest easy in my bed, for fear you went home and did away with Mr Greville, for making you drive me home. I never supposed I should live to endoor the degradation of having a man do things for me against his will, but I had to come to England to find my mistake. And then you sit there and accuse me of disliking you!—Well!!!"

Guest flushed with embarrassment; with something deeper than embarrassment; with honest shame. He clasped his hands between his knees, and bent forward eagerly.

"You are quite right, Miss Briskett, there is no excuse for me. I behaved like a cad. Things got me on the raw, somehow. I imagined—all sorts of things which weren't true! That's no excuse, I know. I should have controlled myself better. But if I was annoyed at starting on that drive, I was far more so when it came to an end. You had your revenge! And you don't deny that you disliked me in return."

"I did so! I did heaps more than that. I thought you just the hatefulest person I'd ever met."

"And now?"

Cornelia laughed easily.

"Oh, well—we've had a pretty good time together, haven't we? We can let bygones be bygones. You're English—vurry, vurry English, but I guess you're nice!"

"What do you mean by English?" But even as he put the question Captain Guest straightened himself, and reared his neck within his stiff, upstanding collar, with that air of ineffable superiority which marks the Englishman in his intercourse with "inferior" nations. Cornelia laughed, a full-throated ha-ha of amusement.

"It's 'English'! There's no other word to it. You are about as English at this moment as you've been in the whole of your life.—I guess we must be getting pretty near London now, for I ken see nothing but smoke."

"Yes, we are nearly there. Will you—may I call at your hotel some day, on the chance of finding you in?"

"Why, suttently! I'd love to have you. You could take me round. If the Moffatts have fixed-up a dinner for themselves, some night, we might go to a theatre together!"

"Um—yes!" Guest surveyed her with doubtful eyes. "I suppose it would be easy enough to find some other lady to play chaperon."

"I don't want a chaperon. Why should I? It's no fun having her poking round, and listening to every word one says. It's ever so much nicer alone."

"I don't doubt it, but—in Rome one must do as the Romans do, Miss Briskett! In England a man does not take a girl to a theatre unchaperoned. It's not the thing."

"I don't care a mite. It's the custom with us, anyway, and there's no country in the world where women are more respected. What's the harm, I want to know!"

"No harm at all. That's not the question. It's simply not the custom."

"Do you mean to say you refuse to take me alone, even if I ask you?"

"I do!"

"Then you're a mean old thing, and I shan't go at all!"

Guest laughed; an amused little laugh, in which there was an unwonted softness. Somehow, he quite enjoyed being called "a mean old thing" by Cornelia Briskett. There was an intimacy in the sound, which more than nullified the disparagement.

"I think you will! You are too 'straight' to punish me for what is not my fault. It would be much more amusing for me

to take you about unattended, and so far as I'm concerned, I can afford to ignore conventions. A man can do as he likes. It is you I am thinking of. You may not approve of our ideas, but that does not alter their existence, or the fact that whip; you are here you must be judged by them. You would not like to be considered careless of your reputation?"

"I don't care a mite what the old fossils, think."

"/do, then; and I will take no part in putting you in a false position."

Cornelia pouted, but in her heart admired his firmness, as any woman would. She stared at the forest of chimney-tops without speaking, for several minutes, then suddenly turned towards him, speaking in what was evidently supposed to be a lifelike imitation of the English accent, as spoken by the Lady of the Manor.

"Th-anks; aw-fly tha-anks! How varry kind! I shall be charmed. ... Too aw-fly sweet of you, don't-cher-know!"

"That's all right!" laughed Guest, happily. "We'll manage to enjoy ourselves, never fear! There's such a thing as taking *two* chaperons and letting them play with each other. ... Here we are at Paddington. Are your friends coming to meet you?"

"They are. I guess they'll be waiting on the platform. She's tall and fine-looking, and dresses fit to kill—"

She paused with a sharp little intake of breath, for the train, as it snorted into the station, had passed by the figure of a woman standing conspicuously alone—a tall woman, with hair of a violent peroxide gold, holding up an elaborate white gown, to display a petticoat of flounced pink silk. It was Cornelia's first introduction to Mrs Moffatt in "shore clothes," and to an eye accustomed to Norton simplicity the vision was sufficiently startling. Also—it was hateful to think such things—but, that hair! On the steamer it had been just an ordinary brown!

Cornelia would have died rather than own it, but she felt a qualm. On the platform she saw other ladies standing waiting the arrival of the train; smart, well-dressed, even golden-headed ladies not a few, but none in the least resembling Mrs Silas P Moffatt. A swift desire arose that Guest might depart before her hostess made her way through the crowd, followed by a resigned recollection that that would be of no avail, since the two were bound to meet sooner or later. She stepped out of the carriage, keeping her head turned in an opposite direction, but almost immediately a crisp rustling of skirts, a strong odour of violette de parme, and a loud—"Say! is that you?" proclaimed that the search was at an end.

Cornelia forced a smile to her lips, and acknowledged her identity in suitable terms, and Mrs Moffatt gushed over her, in a Yankee accent, strong enough to cut with a knife, casting the while, arch, questioning glances in Guest's direction. Cornelia suffered qualm number two. Even to her ears, the tone of her friend's voice sounded unduly loud and nasal, and looking from her to her late travelling companion, it appeared that to be "English" need not be invariably a disadvantage. Of course, Mrs Moffatt was not a good type of American; she belonged to the class who brought that honourable title into disrepute. How was it that she herself had hitherto been blind to peculiarities which now aroused an instant prejudice?

"Don't you want to introduce me to your friend, dear? I never came across such a girl. Someone flying around after you wherever you go!" cried Mrs Moffatt, genially, and Cornelia mumbled the necessary words, with an unusual display of embarrassment. She dared not look at the expression of Guest's face, and his cool, easy voice gave no hint of his real feelings. She turned aside to give instructions to a porter, while her ears strained to catch every word which passed between her companions. Mrs Moffatt was talking about her, gushing over her, in fulsome phrases. Cornelia this! Cornelia that! What business had she to use that name, anyway? She had never received permission to do so. It was impertinent to assume such an air of familiarity!

The three made their way together towards the luggage van, where Cornelia claimed her two big boxes, and saw them hoisted on the top of a four-wheeler. The elation of ten minutes back had died a sudden death, and she felt depressed and lonesome. Among all the crowd no one seemed a greater stranger than this woman by her side; in comparison with her, Captain Guest appeared an old and proven friend. She raised her eyes to his, as the cabman busily strapped the last box to the roof, and found his eyes fixed on her face with a very grave scrutiny. She did not know how pale and dejected was her own appearance, how different from the jaunty self-confidence of an hour before; but Guest had been keen to notice the quickly succeeding expressions, and was saying to himself: "She is upset. Something is different from what she expected. It's a bad lookout for her with that terrible woman, but she must have known her before..."

Mrs Moffatt glanced from one to the other, giggled meaningly, and stepped into the cab. They were alone; as much alone in the midst of the noise and confusion, as in the quiet of the railway carriage.

"Well," said Guest, regretfully; "I suppose I must say good-bye! I'll come round soon to see how you are getting along, and—Miss Briskett, here is my card.—It gives the address of my club. If you should need me for anything, at any time, ring me up! You will promise, won't you? I could be with you in a few minutes."

Cornelia smiled faintly.

"Oh, thanks; I don't know about *needing*. Mr Moffatt will be round to look after us, but—Norton's my only home over here, and you seem like a bit of it! I'll be real glad to see you."

She held out her hand to him; he held it for a moment in a tight, protective grasp, then took off his hat to Mrs Moffatt, and turned away. Twenty yards farther on the cab passed him, and he caught another glimpse of the two faces; one small and white, the other heavy in outline, and suspiciously blue-pink as to cheeks.

"Thank heaven, I came up!" said Captain Guest to himself.

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## Chapter Sixteen.

Cornelia was surprised to find that her friends were not already housed at the Ritz, but had been staying at a private hotel, in a dull side street, where the cab called on the way from the station, to take up a pile of luggage lying ready packed in the hall.

"The fashionable hotels are all crowded out in the season," Mrs Moffatt explained. "We've had our names down for ages at the Ritz, but it was impossible to get in before to-day. I don't know as we should have managed even now, if it hadn't been for you, dear. It worked wonders when we said you would be one of the party. You don't mind having your name mentioned, do you? You've just got to play up to these managers, if you don't want to be put off for ever, or poked away in a back room."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Cornelia, easily. "If my name is of any use, use it for all you're worth. I shouldn't have supposed anyone would know it over here. They don't in Norton."

"My dear, the hotel is crammed full of Americans, and any one of them would say it was poor business to refuse the daughter of Edward B Briskett. The connection might be worth a heap, if you went home and allowed you were satisfied. Silas don't count for anything—he's no push! We might have waited for ever if it had been left to him!"

To judge by the hangdog expression of the said Silas as he came forward to greet his guest at the door of the Ritz, the success attending his wife's manoeuvres had not inspired him with any particular joy. Cornelia thought he looked more henpecked than ever, but he received her warmly, and hovered round to assist with the smaller impedimenta, while his wife hurried forward into the hotel. Inside all was brightness and gaiety; little parties of visitors grouped here and there about the large, light hall; obsequious clerks bowing before one, hoping that the rooms reserved might give satisfaction; begging to be informed if any comfort were lacking; summoning waiters to show the way to the lift. Cornelia was annoyed to notice that most of these attentions were directed towards herself, but as Mrs Moffatt did not appear to take umbrage, it seemed wisest to make no protest. The mistake was not likely to occur again, for with so many guests in the house, individual attention could not extend beyond the arrival civilities.

Tea was served in the Empire suite, which had been reserved for the party, and Cornelia hated herself for feeling so little in sympathy with a host and hostess whose one anxiety seemed to be to provide for her enjoyment. From a printed list of amusements, she was bidden to make her choice for every evening in the week; for the afternoons, river-picnics were suggested, coaching expeditions to outlying scenes of interest, drives in the Park. For the mornings—well, naturally, there was just one thing to be done in the morning, and that was shopping!

"I hope you've brought up heaps of money, my dear. You'll need it. The things are just heavenly this season!" Mrs Moffatt declared, but Cornelia remained unfired.

"I've a circular note; it's all right so far as that goes, but I shan't want any more clothes for ages! I brought over a whole trousseau, and so far as I can see, the half will go back unpacked. They don't dress down at Norton—they *clothe*! You've got to be covered right up to the chin, and to work in all the blue serge you can, and that's about all there is to it. If you fixed-up like we do at home, you'd make as much stir as the fire-engine. I'd like to mail a few presents, if I saw anything really new and snappy, but I shan't go near a store for myself."

"I shall, then!" cried Mrs Moffatt, laughing. "I got next to nothing in Paris. The shops over there aren't a patch on London, in my opinion, and the language puts one off. I can't get the hang of it, and it gets on my nerves fitting on clothes, and not being able to find fault. You'll have to come round with me, Cornelia. I've been waiting till you came, to decide on heaps of things. You've got such lovely taste. Silas wants to give me some furs, and I've seen an emerald necklace that I'm bound to have if I'm to know another happy moment. I've been in twice to see it, and I guess the man's beginning to weaken. It would pay him to let me have it at a reduction, rather than keep it lying idle. You shall come with me, and say what you think it's worth; but mind, I'm to have the first chance! You mustn't try to snap it up. A few hundred dollars don't matter to you one way or the other, but I've got to worry round to make the money go as far as it will. It's not that Silas wants to stint me; he's not that sort, but he hasn't the balance behind him your father has!"

Silas smiled in sickly acknowledgment of his wife's consideration, fidgeted in his seat, and finally took himself downstairs, to see about securing theatre tickets, whereupon his wife heaved a sigh of relief, and helped herself to a fresh cup of tea.

"Thank goodness! I ken't stand men in the daytime. They don't take any interest in clothes or parcels, or trying-on, but kinder hang round, looking bored and superior! It gets on my nerves. ... That was a real smart-looking man you had with you to-day, dear. Guest? did you say—Captain Guest? English, isn't he? Acts as though he'd got the patent, and everybody else was imitation. I rather like it myself, I don't think anything of a man who takes a back seat." The short, impatient little sigh was evidently dedicated to the memory of the absent Silas. ... "Where did you pick him up, dear? He seems very devoted. Anything coming on between you?"

Cornelia's "No!" made the listener start in her seat, so loud was it, so stern, so eloquent of displeasure. She herself was astonished at the white heat of anger which possessed her as she listened to Mrs Moffatt's questionings. "Picked him up," indeed! What insolence; what vulgarity! What an indignity to speak of him in such words. Her indignation seemed almost as much on Guest's account as her own. A vision of his face rose before her, she seemed to see the curl of the lip, the droop of the eyelid with which he would have greeted such an expression.

"No! Suttently not! He is the merest acquaintance. There is not even an ordinary friendship between us. I may very

probably never meet him again.”

“Is that so?” queried Mrs Moffatt, calmly. As the Captain had himself announced his intention of calling at the hotel, the only effect of Cornelia’s violence was to deepen the impression that there was “something in it,” but she was too diplomatic to pursue the subject. Instead, she prattled on about a dozen inconsequent topics, and finally suggested a drive in the Park before dinner.

“It will freshen you up after your journey, and there’s nothing else to do for the next two hours. Just ring, will you, dear, and make arrangements, while I write a few notes in my room. A victoria, or a motor, whichever you prefer, and in about half-an-hour. That will give us time to prink.” She rustled out of the room, and Cornelia rang and gave the order, only too thankful to avoid a prolonged *tête-à-tête* indoors. Once again she wondered how it had come to pass that she had become on intimate terms with this woman, who now jarred upon her at every turn. On board the steamer her own friends had scarcely left their state-rooms during the voyage, and Mrs Moffatt, in a neat tweed costume, and an enveloping blue veil, had played the part of ministering angel with much devotion, during three dreary days, when she herself had lain on a chair in a sheltered corner of the deck; had read aloud, repeated amusing little anecdotes about the passengers, taken her for constitutionals up and down, and even helped her to bed at night. When Liverpool was reached, it seemed as if they had known one another for years. They had kissed at parting, and mutually agreed to meet, and have a good time.

“Shucks!” cried Cornelia, mentally. “It’s that old Norton! I’ve gotten so used to dowds, that the sight of a Paris gown scares me all into fits. I’ve looked forward to coming to London all my life, and now I’m here, I’m going to enjoy myself all I know. Now then, for the Park! I guess that grey crêpe, and the hat with the white feathers, will be about the best I can do for the honour of the flag. You’ve got to strike a balance, my dear, and plump for neutral colours as long as you run in harness with Mrs Silas P Moffatt!”

That first drive in Hyde Park was a pleasant experience, though the trees looked grey and dusty, after the fresh green of the country. Cornelia, like most of her sisters, had, as a first object, to see the people, not the Park itself, and certainly they were worth the seeing. There is no place in the world where finer specimens of humanity can be seen than in Hyde Park on the afternoon of a bright June day. Cornelia admired the tall, immaculately-groomed men, the dainty, high-bred looking women, with their air of indolent grace. They did not look as if they were enjoying themselves particularly, but she enjoyed, looking at them, and honestly acknowledged the presence of a certain quality unowned by herself. “They’ve got a far-off look, as if they couldn’t see anything nearer than a hundred miles, and were scared to laugh, in case they might break! ... I guess it’s what they call ‘*breed!*’ Captain Guest’s got it, too. We’ve not much use for that kind of thing at home, but it—counts! If you’d been used to it all your life, it would be a jar to step down...”

Mrs Moffatt knew a great many people by sight, and pointed them out as they drove by. Lady this, the Countess of that, Mrs Blank, who wrote society novels, and was noted for her taste in dress, the beautiful Miss Dash.—“Not that I can see much beauty in her myself. She’s not a patch on you, when you’re in form!” Cornelia felt a girl’s natural pleasure in the compliment, in the truth of which she complacently agreed. She did not envy Miss Dash her looks, but she did emphatically envy her her friends, particularly her male friends, who clustered around her carriage, eager for a word. One felt decidedly out of it, driving through a crowd of strangers, not one of whom turned a welcoming smile in your direction, nor cared whether you came or went. At home, Cornelia was accustomed to be in the midst of all that was going on, a central figure, round which all the rest revolved. She did not at all appreciate being relegated to the position of regarding the fray from the vantage of a hired vehicle!

Cornelia craned her head to right and to left, scanning the passing crowd for a familiar face. It seemed impossible that among hundreds of people there should not be someone whom she recognised, and her faith was justified, for just at the bend near the Marble Arch, she had a passing glimpse of Guest’s tall figure, standing talking to two ladies, one middle-aged, the other young, and graceful, and smiling. They were quietly, even simply, attired, but their whole air and carriage breathed that indefinable something which she had just struggled to define: something diametrically different from the ostentatious display of the woman by her side. Theoretically, Cornelia was thankful to escape observation; in reality she felt an absurd pang of loneliness and disappointment, as the carriage bore her out of sight.

The evening was spent at a theatre, and by eleven o’clock next morning both ladies had started forth on one of the shopping expeditions, which seemed to constitute Mrs Moffatt’s chief pleasure in life. They drove first of all to the jeweller’s, where Cornelia was shown the emerald necklace, a wonderful collection of stones, in an antique setting, with which she herself promptly fell in love. The price was excessive, even for her own deep purse, and she concluded that Mr Moffatt’s means must be even larger than she had imagined, since his wife seriously contemplated such a purchase. There was a good deal of bargaining, half-serious, half-joking, between Mrs Moffatt and the very imposing-looking personage behind the counter, but fortified by the advent of another possible purchaser, the latter steadily refused to reduce his price, and once again Mrs Moffatt retired discomfited from the struggle.

“I know just how it will be,” she cried, “I’ll have to give it up, and then you’ll step in, and carry it off before my eyes! But you’ve got to wait a bit, till I see what I can do with Silas. I’m not going to give up yet awhile.”

Cornelia laughed easily. “Oh, I’ll play fair. If you give up the idea, I daresay Poppar’d let me have it. He says emeralds suit me better than any other stones; but I shan’t break my heart, one way or the other.” ... Then addressing the shopman: “Have you got anything really new and tasty for little presents? I might as well look round while I’m here.”

Then followed a delightful hour, from the shopkeeper’s point of view, at least, when Cornelia examined the contents of tray after tray, and selected “little presents” to the value of a cool hundred pounds: an old pearl and enamel solitaire stud for her father; a hat-pin composed of a big turquoise, and a selection of dainty, jewelled brooches and bangles for special girl friends.

“I’ll give you the addresses, and you’d better mail them from here. I don’t know how you fix up things to travel safely

from this side, but you can do all that's necessary. I'll give you a cheque and you needn't send them out till you see that it's all right. I'm a stranger to you, and can't expect you to trust me right away, but you'll find the money's there!"

"Well, I should think your name's good enough! No one need fear trusting your father's daughter for a few hundred dollars!" Mrs Moffatt protested, while the shopman waxed eloquent in protestation. Cornelia continued to write addresses on the various boxes, without troubling to answer, for the assiduous manner in which her friend advertised her parentage was already beginning to jar. First to the hotel officials; then to casual acquaintances during the evening, and now to this tradesman! It was a disagreeable change from Norton, where the subject of money was never mentioned, and no one seemed to care whether you were rich or poor.

The whole morning was devoted to shopping; in the afternoon the two ladies went out driving, and returned to the hotel, to find Captain Guest's card on the sitting-room table.

"He has lost no time, anyhow!" said Mrs Moffatt, meaningly.

"He has done the polite thing. Now he need not trouble any more," Cornelia replied. On the whole, she was not sorry to have missed the call. Conversation, with Mrs Moffatt as audience, would have been somewhat of a strain!

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## Chapter Seventeen.

The Moffatts appeared to have few private friends in London, and to show no anxiety to add to their number. Though they displayed an insatiable curiosity about everything which concerned their guest, they volunteered very little information in return, and after three days spent entirely in their society, Cornelia knew little more about them than on the first day of their meeting on shipboard. A mushroom city of the West figured as "home," in occasional references; but the wife frankly declared a hatred of domesticity, while the husband regretted that constant travel was a necessity in his business.

Evidently the present period was one of holiday-making, for Mr Moffatt seemed to do nothing but hang about the hotel, playing odd games of bridge or billiards with stray loafers like himself, and being correspondingly elated or depressed as he won or lost. On the whole, Cornelia preferred him when he was depressed. Exuberance of spirits is apt to wax offensive when divorced from good taste. At times she frankly disliked both husband and wife, and meditated an immediate return to Norton; but as a rule she was absorbed in the interest and charm of the grey old city, which was so unlike anything she had yet visited. It was like turning back a page of history, to see with her own eyes those historical landmarks, of which she had read since childhood; to drive about looking at the names of the streets, the monuments at the corners, the great, inky buildings. Visitors from sunnier lands often take away from our capital an impression of gloom and ugliness, but Cornelia's artistic sense realised a picturesque element which rose superior to smoke and grime. She loved the narrow, irregular streets, the Turner-esque haze which hung over the sky, even in this fine summer weather.

The City was a solemn land of work, but the West End was a fairy realm of luxury and pleasure. Flowers everywhere, stacked up in great piles at the corners of the streets; hanging from window-boxes; massed together in the beds of the parks. The carriages blocked one another in the narrow roads; the balconies were draped with awnings; gorgeously-clad flunkeys stood upon the doorsteps, ushering in long streams of visitors. In the City men worked for money; in the West End they threw it away, carelessly, heedlessly, as if it had been dross. The great hotels sheltered hives of strangers, who admired and criticised, envied and scoffed, and flitted industriously about on the edge of the feast; on the edge, but never actually passing over the border!

On the fourth morning of her stay in town, a note, addressed in a strange handwriting, was brought to Cornelia, with her morning tea. She guessed at its authorship before opening the envelope, and reading the name "Rupert Guest," at the end of the letter. "Rupert!" A good name, an appropriate name! Strong and manly, with an old-world echo of dignity in the sound. One could not associate this man with abbreviations or nicknames. At work and at play, at home and abroad, he would remain plain, unabbreviated "Rupert." One doubted if even his own mother ventured on a familiarity! Cornelia read the few lines with lively curiosity:—

"Dear Miss Briskett,—I was disappointed to miss seeing you when I called at your hotel on Saturday. My aunt, Lady Seymour, is giving a reception to-morrow afternoon, and would be delighted to see you and your friends, if you have nothing better on hand. There ought to be some pretty good music. I will call at three o'clock, on the chance that you may care to come.—Yours faithfully, Rupert Guest."

Enclosed was a formal card of invitation, dated from Grosvenor Gate, "Miss Briskett and party" written on the corner.

Cornelia sat banked up against her pillows, her ruddy locks framing her little face in a glory of rippling curls and waves, her lips pursed in slow reflection.

"No-o! I guess Miss Briskett and party would rather not! I don't see the fun of squeezing in among a lot of grandees, who don't want anything of us but just to quiz and stare, and make remarks. If he'd asked me alone, I'd have risked it, just to see how they manage their shows over here; but he's too proper to take me without a chaperon, and ... Well, anyway, the Moffatts are right-down good to me, and I'll have no hand in having them snubbed! Miss Briskett will politely refuse, and the party won't have a chance of accepting, for they won't be told anything about it. I hate a fuss."

Cornelia went downstairs, deciding to write a letter before going out, and post it to the club; but during breakfast Mrs Moffatt announced with profuse apologies that she and her husband were obliged to devote the afternoon to visiting a friend living at some distance from town, and must therefore leave her to her own resources. Perhaps she would

like to do a little shopping on her own account, take a drive, or visit a gallery! Cornelia, with a sudden rising of spirits, guessed she could find a dozen things to do, and bade her friends feel no anxiety on her score. She wrote no letters that morning, but sallied forth on the inevitable shopping excursion, with a particularly gay and jaunty air, and an inclination to bubble into laughter on the slightest provocation, at which Mrs Moffatt exclaimed in envy—

“My, what spirits you do enjoy! I wish I could laugh like that. Some people have all the luck!” She sighed as she spoke, and Cornelia, glancing at her, caught a haggard look beneath the white veil. It occurred to her for the first time that her hostess was no longer young. She wondered how she would look at night, denuded of powder and rouge, and luxuriant golden locks? An elderly woman, thin and worn, with the crow’s feet deepening round her eyes. A woman whose life was spent in the pursuit of personal gain, and who reaped in return the inevitable harvest of weariness and satiety. Cornelia was too happy to judge her harshly. She was sorry for her and made a point of being unusually amiable during the long hours of trailing about from shop to shop, which were beginning to be a severe tax on her patience. Mrs Moffatt never seemed to make a purchase outright, but preferred to pay half a dozen visits to a shop, trying on garment or ornament, as the case might be, haggling over the price, and throwing small sops to the vendor, in the shape of the purchase of insignificant trifles.

Cornelia herself was tempted to buy a number of articles which she neither needed nor knew exactly how to use, partly from want of something to do while her companion was occupied, and partly from a sense of shame, at giving so much trouble for nothing. Every day, also, boxes of fineries were sent “on approval,” to the hotel, so that one seemed to live in a constant atmosphere of milliner’s shop. Cornelia wondered to what purpose was this everlasting dressing up. The dejected Silas could hardly count as an audience, since he was the most indifferent of husbands, and it seemed a poor reward for so much trouble to receive the passing glances of strangers.

“I hope when I settle down, I’ll have some real interest in life. I’ll take care that I have, too! I’d go crazed if there was nothing more to it than hanging round stores all the time,” said Cornelia to herself, as she bade farewell to her friends after lunch, and settled herself with a book in the corner of the lounge, to await Guest’s arrival. She was pleased at the prospect of meeting him again; mischievously amused at the anticipation of his embarrassment when he found that her chaperons had fled. It would be a delightful change to chat with him for half an hour, and when he departed to listen to the “pretty good music,” she herself would get into a hansom and drive to Saint Paul’s to listen to the wonderful boys’ voices chanting the evening service. Cathedrals were not included in the London known to Mrs Silas P Moffatt, but Cornelia was determined not to leave the metropolis without visiting the great temple of the East. After four days of pure, undiluted Moffatt, she felt mentally and spiritually starved. It would be good to leave the world and sit apart awhile beneath the great dome...

At five minutes past three by the clock, Guest appeared in the doorway of the hotel, made an inquiry of the porter, and was directed to Cornelia’s sheltered seat. She saw him cast a glance over her neat, walking costume, as he approached, and naughtily determined to prolong his uncertainty. On her own side, she honestly admired his appearance; compared him to his advantage with the other men in the hall, and was proud to welcome him as her friend. Her little, white face was sparkling with animation, as she held out her hand to greet him.

“How d’you do, Captain Guest? It’s real good of you to come again so soon. I was sorry to miss you Saturday afternoon.”

“So was I.” Guest seated himself, and deposited his hat carefully by his side. “I waited half an hour, and then gave it up, and went to loaf in the Park. It’s the only thing to do before dinner.”

“I saw you there, standing on the sidewalk talking to two ladies, an old one, and a young one, as pretty as—”

“A moss rose!” he suggested quickly, and they laughed together over the remembrance. “Were you driving? I wish I had seen you! Is—er—Mrs Moffatt quite well?”

“Puffectly, thank you,” said Cornelia, calmly. She noted the quick glance around, and wondered if he felt it compromising to sit with her alone, even in the publicity of a hotel lounge. “We drive most afternoons, and go to the theatre every evening. I’m having a giddy time—just about as different from Norton as it’s possible to imagine! Have you heard anything from the Manor? That wretched girl has never sent me as much as a postal, and I’m dying to hear what’s going on.”

“No. I’ve heard nothing. I never for a moment expected that I should. Greville is too much engaged.” Guest knitted his brows, bitched his trousers at the knee, and cleared his throat uncertainly. Cornelia divined that he was waiting for her to refer to his aunt’s invitation, and feeling somewhat at a loss to account for the severity of her costume. At last the question came out suddenly.

“Er—you got my note?”

“I did! I thank you for it. It was real kind of good to take the trouble. I suppose you had to go and ask for those invitations?”

“I asked, of course, but my aunt was delighted to give them. It will be quite worth going to, I think—good music, and something of a function! You would enjoy seeing the people. I hope you are not going to say that you can’t come!”

“What makes you think that, I wonder? Don’t I look smart enough? I’m sorry you don’t approve of my costume!” She sat up straight in her seat; a smart little hat perched on the top of shaded locks; a neat little stock beneath the rolled-back collar of her coat; minute little shoes, with ridiculous points, appearing beneath the hem of her skirt. Guest looked her over deliberately, his dark face softening into a very charming smile.

“I do! Very much indeed!”



"Maybe it's a trifle homely, but it's best to strike a balance. Mrs Moffatt's apt to be a bit gaudy on these occasions."

"It is very good of her to take so much trouble. Is—er—is she nearly ready, do you know?"

Cornelia had been narrowly on the watch for the flicker of dismay on Guest's face; it came surely enough, but was suppressed by such a gallant effort that, to use her own vernacular, she "weakened" at the sight. The impish light died out of her eyes, and she said frankly—

"I guess I've been jollying all the time! Mrs Moffatt's gone with her husband to visit a friend who lives quite a good way out, and she won't be back before seven. I didn't tell her of your invitation, as her plans were made, so it wasn't worth while. I'm 'alone in London' for the afternoon. Sounds kinder pathetic, don't it; but I'm enjoying it very well."

"Then—er—am I to have the pleasure of taking you alone?"

Cornelia threw him a glance of tragic reproach.

"Captain Guest! I'm surpr-iz-ed! How dare you take advantage of my unprotected position, to make such a suggestion? In England young girls—*nice* young girls, do not go about with young gentlemen unchaperoned. I'm shocked at you! I should have believed you would have been more considerate!"

"We could start early. I could introduce you to my aunt. She would find some ladies, with whom you could sit during the concert."

Cornelia made a grimace, the reverse of appreciative.

"No, thank you; I guess not! I'm not over-fond of sitting with ladies at any time, but strange ones are the limit. You tell your aunt that it's real kind of her, and I vury much regret that I don't want to go. I've fixed-up just how I'm going to spend the afternoon. First, I'm going to give you some coffee—the waiter's bringing it along—then, when you go off to your crush, I shall get into a hansom and drive away into the City, to Saint Paul's. The service is at four. I'll sit right by myself, and listen till that's over, then I'll go round and see the tombs. Quite a number of big people are buried there, I'm told."

"Saint Paul's!" Guest's tone was eloquent of amazement. "But why Saint Paul's, of all places on earth? Why not hit on something livelier, while you are about it? There's a splendid exhibition of paintings in Bond Street, and the Academy, of course, and the Wallace Collection—half a dozen shows which are worth seeing. Why go into the City on a day like this?"

"Because I want to! I've had four days cram full of—" She hesitated, seeking for a word that would not incriminate her hosts—"of *fuss*, and I want something else for a change. From all I hear, Saint Paul's is a kinder big, and soothing, and empty. You can sit and think without being jostled up against someone else all the time. I don't suppose there's a more sociable creature on earth than I am myself, but every now and then I've just *got* to get away and have things out by myself."

Guest sipped his coffee in thoughtful silence, glancing at Cornelia from time to time, with eyes full of a new diffidence. An impulse gripped him, an impulse so extraordinary that he hesitated to put it into words. He wanted to go to Saint Paul's too; to drive beside Cornelia through the streets, to see her face as she sat in the dim old cathedral; that softened, tremulous face, of which he had caught a glimpse once before, the memory of which lived with him still. When the service was over, he wanted to be her guide, to climb with her the tortuous staircase, and look down on the ant-like figures in the streets below; to descend with her to the subterranean vaults. ... He, Rupert Guest, wished to visit Saint Paul's on a grilling June afternoon, in preference to attending a fashionable rendezvous—what madness was this which possessed him? It was rank folly; he would be ashamed to put the request into words. Pshaw! it was only the impulse of a moment—he would never think of it again. Then he looked at Cornelia once more, and heard himself say, in deliberate tones—

"May I come with you? I should not interrupt. If you prefer, I could sit in another place during the service, but I'd like to come. Afterwards we could go round together. It would be good of you to give me the chance."

"But—the reception?"

"Oh, hang the reception! I'm not sure that I should go in any ease. Do let me come, Miss Briskett. I want to. Badly!"

Cornelia hesitated, staring at him with puzzled eyes.

"You seemed to think Saint Paul's a pretty queer choice when I mentioned it a few minutes back!"

"I did; more shame to me, I suppose; but then you explained your reasons.—I don't pretend that I should care to go by myself, but if you take me as your companion, it might be good for me, too. ... Would it disturb you to have me there?"

"No-o," said Cornelia, slowly. "I'd as lief you were there as not! I feel differently since I heard that story. ... You must need heartening up sometimes. Let's go right along then, and see if we ken't lay in a store of good thoughts, that will help us along for quite a while. Will you order a cab?..."

Guest walked in silence to the door of the hotel. By his own request he was going to attend a church afternoon service with Cornelia Briskett! The thing seemed too extraordinary to be believed! He took his seat in the hansom in a kind of stunned surprise. Truly, every man was a stranger to himself, and there was no foretelling what an hour might bring forth!

Cornelia turned to survey herself in the slip of mirror, and carefully adjusted the set of her hat.

“Say!” she cried, laughingly, “we’ve forgotten that chaperon! Suppose you think one’s not needed in a cathedral.” She paused, dimpling mischievously. “Well! that’s just as you’re made. I guess if I were set on it, I could flirt in a *crypt*!”

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## Chapter Eighteen.

Captain Guest could not flatter himself that Cornelia was in anyway “set on” flirting with himself, since nothing could have been further removed from that attitude than her behaviour during the afternoon. She displayed a keen interest in her first view of the Strand and Fleet Street, and though her criticisms of those ancient thoroughfares were the reverse of complimentary, she was evidently impressed by the vast solemnity of the cathedral itself. The usual congregation of stragglers were dotted about on the chairs in the nave; dreary-looking derelicts from God knows where, who drift in through the open doorways seeking refuge from heat in summer, and cold in winter, and listen with apathetic indifference to the passing services. Guest seated himself by Cornelia’s side at the end of an unoccupied row, but for all the notice she paid him, he might as well have been at his aunt’s reception miles away. Only once, as the boys’ voices soared upwards in a strain of almost unearthly sweetness, did she turn her face towards him, in involuntary appeal for sympathy, and at that moment there could no longer be any doubt as to her looks. She was beautiful; so beautiful that Guest was dazzled by the sight of the white, kindled face.

The service was an unmitigated success; an hour to cherish in memory, but in the sight-seeing expedition which followed, there was no denying the fact that Cornelia *jarred*! Even the most phlegmatic of Englishmen must be roused to a feeling of pride by such a review of the deeds of his countrymen as is set forth in a national cathedral; it may be even conceded that his attitude may be a trifle irritating to strangers from distant lands; be that as it may Guest and Cornelia seemed fated to view everything from different points of view. Where he waxed enthusiastic, she displayed cool commonsense; when he stood dumb, she criticised the design of the sculpture, and speculated as to the cost; she guessed it was “playing it pretty low down on Wellington to stow him away in a cellar,” and made scathing remarks by Gordon’s memorial. “You muffed it badly that time! Guess if he’d belonged to *us*, he’d have been hopping round still!”

Guest was thankful to mount the narrow staircase leading to the golden gallery, for Cornelia was so essentially a creature of to-day that he felt more in sympathy with her in the air and the sunshine, with the echo of the great city rising to their ears. They stood side by side, while the breeze blew elf-like tendrils of hair round the girl’s face. The gentle expression of half an hour ago had departed, and she looked a creature of steel and flame; a vital, indomitable being, tingling with energy and joy. At sight of the forest of chimney pots stretching away into the horizon, her eyes shone with an enthusiasm which the wonders of the cathedral had failed to inspire. To Guest the outlook was dreariness personified; the vastness which so impressed his companion conveyed to him only a realisation of work and struggle; of a pent-house in which human creatures struggled for existence. He stood in silence, while Cornelia exhausted her supply of adjectives, brooding on the difference in the standpoints from which each regarded life, until presently she interrupted with a personal question.

“You have never told me where you live, Captain Guest! London is not your real home, is it?”

“Thank goodness, no! I could never live in a city. My home is in the country—Staffordshire. It was a valuable property fifty or sixty years ago, but the factories have crept nearer and nearer, and, of course, that depreciates values. It is let at present. I hope to save enough money to go back in time to end my days there. It’s a fine old place, but its value is bound to go on dropping.”

“Couldn’t you pull it down, and build small property on the site? If there are factories about it might pay vury well.”

Guest’s look of stupefaction, incredulity, of horror, could scarcely have been greater if Cornelia had suggested a leap down to the street beneath. “Good heavens! what an idea! You can’t realise what you are talking about, Miss Briskett. That house has been in the possession of my family since the time of the Tudors!”

Cornelia elevated indifferent eyebrows. “I don’t know as that’s any reason why you should drop money on it now! I wouldn’t take any stock of Toodor’s beside my own convenience. It’s better to own a house you ken live in, than the Garden of Eden, and be obliged to rent it out!”

“There is such a thing as sentiment, Miss Briskett, though you don’t seem to realise it.”

“Don’t you make any mistake about that! I realise it right enough. I’m death on sentiment in its right place, but it takes a back seat when daily bread comes into the question.”

“And if I told you that I’d rather starve than desecrate the home of my ancestors—that I’d sooner end my days in a London garret than level a single wall for my own benefit—what then? Would you put me down as a madman for my pains?”

Guest spoke with unwonted passion, staring down into the girl’s face with challenging eyes, but Cornelia preserved her attitude of complacent, albeit commiserating, superiority.

“My Poppar’d say it was sheer wickedness to see a chance of making money, and letting it slide, but I don’t go so far as that. Everyone has a right to be miserable in his own way, but—I prefer to be comfortable.”

Her ripple of laughter struck a chill to Guest’s heart. He looked at her moodily beneath knitted brows.

“How is it that we always *do* feel differently? We seem never to agree. What is the explanation, I wonder?”

"We *are* different!" returned Cornelia, simply. "The difference is deep down beneath all we say or do. We're *made* differently from the start. You felt it the first moment we met, and I did the same. We kinder hated each other, and wanted to scratch! That was instinct! You don't get behind instinct in a hurry. Later on other things come in and muddle one up, but just in the first moment one sees clearly. You thought Elma Ramsden the sweetest thing, and were all fired up to help her, but when you looked at me you were bursting with pride and prejudice. Why was that, I want to know?"

"You have answered yourself. Prejudice—a blind, ignorant prejudice, of which I am ashamed; and pride—wounded pride, because you attempted to lay down the law! Don't judge me by that unfortunate beginning, Miss Briskett. I have repented sufficiently to deserve forgiveness!"

Cornelia rested her chin on her clasped hands, and stared thoughtfully over the forest of chimney-tops.

"You are sorry because I'm a girl, and we've had some pretty good times together; but that don't alter the position of the case. I guess we are each pretty good types of our different nationalities. We ken't blame ourselves for that; if the truth's told, I expect we are proud of it, but it makes it impossible to feel the same way. We're bound to jolt up against each other every time we dip below the surface."

"You find it impossible then to think of me as a friend?"

To his own amazement there was a touch of genuine anxiety in Guest's voice. It seemed to matter a great deal whether this girl of the ruddy locks and curling lips accepted his friendship, or deliberately put it aside; to matter none the less that she had jarred upon a dozen prejudices during the course of the last half hour! He knew the tension of suspense before he met her radiant, answering smile.

"Oh, my, no, we're friends right enough! If you haven't to live with people all the time, it's easy enough to avoid the rubs. I guess we can agree to differ for the few times we're likely to meet." ... She buried her face in her hand, to suppress a yawn. "Those steps have just about finished me! I'm all used up. Don't you want to give me some tea? I noticed one of those Fuller stores in the Strand as we came along. Let's go right back and have a rest!"

Guest led the way downwards, feeling but indifferently consoled. An uncomfortable depression weighed on him as he walked through the streets, and sat with Cornelia in a corner of the tea-shop. It was the first meal of which he had partaken in her company, and it gave a feeling of intimacy to face each other across the daintily-spread table, to watch her pour out tea with the pretty white hands on which the diamond solitaire twinkled meaningly. She seemed really tired, and for once was content to be silent while she drank boiling tea and munched rich cakes, with supreme disregard of digestion. As for Guest, two phrases rang in his ears, to the exclusion of other thoughts—"The few times we are likely to meet"—"We might be a honeymoon couple..." Two suggestions, far apart as the poles, yet each bringing within it a thrill of something like fear. He did not wish to find himself in the position of bridegroom to this Yankee stranger; the thought was absurd, nevertheless it was distinctly unpleasant to picture anyone else occupying the position! It was worse than unpleasant, it was actually painful to think that the newly-formed friendship might be interrupted by a separation of three thousand miles! He sat, staring at his companion with the intensity which accompanies a preoccupied mind, until presently Cornelia began to arch her eyebrows, purse up her lips, and crane her head from side to side.

"I beg your pardon! If I was to get up and stand on that bench, do you think it would aid your scrutiny? What's the verdict, please? It's the least you can do to tell me, after quizzing all this time! ... What do you think of my looks? Honestly, mind, without any bunkum! I'm crazy to know."

"I think—sometimes—you are beautiful!"

"Seriously? You mean it?"

"I do!"

The golden eyes met his with a flash of delight, and an arm was stretched impetuously across the table. "Shake hands! You're just the nicest thing! To be puffedly candid, I've thought the same once or twice when I've caught sight of myself in a mirror at a big moment, when I was all worked up!—Big moments are vury suiting, but on ordinary days" (Cornelia put a strong accent on the penultimate), "my nose," she closed one eye to regard with the other the sharp little tip of the member in question, "there's no getting away from it, that my nose is a set-back! It's a mean little thing, without a mite of dignity. And I'm kinder washed-out and pasty by your English roses! Do you think I should look better if my cheeks were pink like Elma's?"

She looked at him with arch inquiry, and even as she did so, either as the result of something which she read in the watching eyes, or by the action of some mysterious mental power, the pink flamed in her cheek, and lo! she was a rose herself; a wonderful, exotic rose, flaming from red to gold! Guest looked at her for a moment, and then hastily dropped his eyes. He was not by nature an impetuous man, but he had a conviction that if he looked at Cornelia any longer at this moment, he might say something which he should afterwards regret.

He did not answer. It seemed unnecessary to answer. His eyes had done that eloquently enough in that moment of meeting. There was a long silence, while Guest mentally pulled himself together, calling himself a fool for his pains; recalling the fact that by her own confession Cornelia was an accomplished flirt; steeling himself against her blandishments. When presently he heard his name pronounced in dulcet tones, he looked up with his most unapproachable air. Cornelia was holding her plate towards him with one hand, while with the other she held a fragment of cake to her lips.

"Another piece, please!" she commanded. "It's the best thing I've struck since I've been this side, and I'm going to wolf into it for all I'm worth! Ordinary meals bore the life out of me, but I'm just wicked when I get started on

sweets!"

Guest signalled to a damsel in attendance, and saw her eyes widen in amazement at the renewed order. She walked away suppressing a smile, and could be observed obviously retailing the incident to a companion behind the counter. It detracted woefully from the romance of the situation to be pointed out as a couple who had demolished a large plateful of cakes, and sent out an order for more!

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## Chapter Nineteen.

Before parting from Cornelia at the hotel, Guest made a point of finding out her programme of amusements for the next few days, as a consequence of which he called at a theatrical depôt on his way to his club, and secured an odd stall for either night. He had already more social engagements than he could keep, but it occurred to him that it would be possible to run into the theatre for an odd half hour, and chat with Cornelia during an interval, on his way from one place to another. He assured himself with much solemnity that it was his duty to look after the girl, since she had told him that he seemed to her like a bit of home, and he had the poorest possible opinion of her hosts.

As for Cornelia, she ran gaily upstairs to her room, disdaining the lift, and all a-sparkle with pleasurable excitement. From her point of view the afternoon had been an unmitigated success; she had been conscious of no jar, being blandly indifferent to every opinion but her own, and was now as whole-hearted in appreciation of her companion as she had previously been violent in denunciation. He was just the sweetest thing, and she was going to see him again to-morrow; maybe, to-night. It felt like being at home again to have a nice man hopping around!

She threw open the door of her room, and started with surprise to meet Mrs Moffatt on the threshold, her arms piled high with parcels. A long, narrow box lay on the top, and she had an impression of seeing her own name written on the cover, before Mrs Moffatt hurried past, speaking rapidly over her shoulder.

"Why, Cornelia, is that you? Excuse me, won't you, coming into your room? The stupid things have gotten the parcels all mixed up. These are the things I ordered this morning. Come into the parlour before you change. I want you a moment."

She bustled down the passage towards her own room, deposited her bundles, then crossed the corridor to the sitting-room, where Cornelia was already seated. She looked up as the elder woman entered, and thought she had never seen her look so worn and tired; so old, despite the artificial colouring.

"I'm afraid you've not had a good time. You look all used up! Wasn't the visit as nice as you expected?"

Mrs Moffatt threw herself down on a chair with a sigh of impatience.

"Oh, my dear, I am so rattled! Every mortal thing's gone wrong from start to finish. Don't ask me about it, for it don't bear speaking of. My head aches fit to split, and now Silas has taken the huff and marched off goodness knows where, and there's a man sitting down in the hall refusing to go away until he gets his money, and disgracing me before the whole hotel. It's for those furs I had sent in the other day. I decided to keep them, and mailed them to a friend in the country to house for me. I can't be worried with a lot of goods in a hotel, so she gives me store-room until we sail. That's where I'm fixed-up, you see. I can't give him either the goods or the money, and when Silas turns ugly, goodness only knows when he may come back. Maybe not till late at night. I'm so mortified I don't know what to do."

Cornelia laughed easily.

"Don't you worry. It's as easy as pie. I'll give you a cheque, and Mr Moffatt can pay me back in the morning. I'll go and write it out for you now. What's the damage?"

"Two hundred pounds; Fredburg and Company. You are an angel, Cornelia! I ken't begin to thank you."

"Don't try, please! What does it matter for a few hours?" cried Cornelia, brightly. She went into her own room, made out the cheque, and handed it to her friend, who promptly carried it away, to return at the expiration of five minutes with a sigh of relief.

"That was one for him. He looked kinder small when he saw your name on the cheque. It's real sweet of you, dear, and Silas will pay up like a lamb when you are the creditor. He won't show his temper to you, as he would to me. You are a stranger, you see, and I'm only his wife."

There was an accent of bitterness in the speaker's voice, and she leant her head on her hands, in an attitude of profound dejection. Cornelia had never before been the witness of so abandoned a mood, but her ideas of loyalty were too much outraged to permit of sympathy. She held her head erect, and her voice sounded cold and distant.

"I'd just as soon not hear any more about Mr Moffatt, if you don't mind. He's been very kind to me, and it's not my business how he behaves. I guess a good many men get crusty when the bills come in, and you're a pretty expensive wife. I should think you'd get tired of prowling about those stores!"

Mrs Moffatt flushed, and bit her lower lip, not attempting to defend herself, but staring before her with weary, vacant eyes. It was a welcome diversion when a waiter entered the room carrying a tray with tea and refreshments, and Cornelia waited on her hostess with an attention which was intended to mitigate her late severity. Although a fuller acquaintance of Mrs Moffatt had increased neither liking nor respect, it had developed a sincere pity for a woman whose life was barren of purpose, of interest, apparently of love also. It was not in Cornelia's nature to see anyone suffer and not try to help, and if it had been her own mother on whom she was waiting she could not have shown

more care and consideration. A table was placed by Mrs Moffatt's side, tea was made with exact remembrance of her preferences; a cushion was brought from a sofa to put behind her back, and a footstool placed ready for her feet. It was while she still knelt to put the stool in position that the elder woman at length broke silence.

"See here, Cornelia!" she cried suddenly, "I mayn't have another chance of talking to you quietly before you go, and there's something I want to say. ... You are young, and rich, and pretty, and strong, and you've had a good time all the way through. Your Poppar spoils you, and you've got just to wish for a thing, and it's there right along. I'm glad of it, for you're a real sweet girl, but, *don't come down too hard on other people!* ... It's a pretty queer world when you compare one person's luck with another! I'm not going to tell you all I've come through, but it's not been too easy. At times I've been to blame, and at times I haven't. I don't know as it makes much difference anyway—the end's the same. Seems to you I'm a pretty poor thing, but you don't know how you'd have been yourself, Cornelia, if you'd come along the same road. You've got to remember that, before you judge!"

"That's so!" assented Cornelia, gravely. She was too "straight" to deny an insinuation which was all too true, but at the same time she felt an acute regret and embarrassment in the thought that a woman so much older than herself should feel it necessary to make such a confession of unworthiness. "I ought to be a heap better than I am, for there isn't anyone living that's had a better time. We've had spells when Poppar's had bad luck, and the money's been short, but we were as happy as grigs planning out how we'd spend the next pile. So long as you can get along, it doesn't matter much about the extras, when you're as happy together as we are, Poppar and I."

Mrs Moffatt sighed once more.

"I never knew my parents. They died when I was a baby, and I was raised among strangers, who put up with me for the sake of the pay. Love never came my way, somehow. I suppose some folks would say that was my own fault. There was a man I could have cared for, but he didn't want me, and I married Silas for a change; to get away from the dull old life. ... You be careful who you marry, Cornelia! You're the sort of girl who does things pretty thoroughly either way; there's no middle course for you. You're bound to be either blissful or wretched. You've got enough money of your own, so you can afford to choose. Lucky girl!—Is it going to be that Captain Guest?"

"Suttenly not!" Cornelia rose to her feet, and walked back to the tea-table, very stiff in the back, and pink in the cheeks. She was angry with herself for blushing, and the fact naturally made her blush the more. "I told you before that we have only met once or twice, and more'n half the time has been taken up in quarrelling. We are too different ever to run together in double harness."

"Well—I'm sorry! He's got lots of frills, but he looks the right sort all the same. I'm sorry. You ought to have a good man, Cornelia."

Mrs Moffatt pushed aside her half-finished cup of tea, and rose wearily to her feet.

"Well, I guess I'll go and dress. We'll have some champagne for dinner, and that will perk us up for the theatre. They say it's a real good play, and we shall only be together two more nights, so I want you to have a good time. It seems mean not to ask you to stay on, but our plans are all uncertain. We may be off ourselves any time now. Silas never settles down for more than a few days."

Cornelia gave the politely inaudible murmur usual on such occasions. Much as she had enjoyed the stay in town, she could not pretend to regret the prospect of returning to Norton. Later on she would make a longer visit to town, in Poppar's company, but even if the invitation were given she could not consent to remain any longer the guest of Mrs Silas P Moffatt. She was a woman whom it was impossible to respect, and to Cornelia, respect was a necessary foundation to friendship. Silas did not count! He was "a little misery," to be regarded only as an adjunct to his wife. She was even surprised to hear that he was capable of exhibiting ill-temper. In any case, it seemed to be short-lived, as dinner found him in his usual place, and then and throughout the evening he was, if anything, a trifle more animated than usual, thanking Cornelia warmly for helping his wife out of an awkward position, and regretting that in the rush to the theatre there was not time to discharge the debt forthwith. "But we must settle up after breakfast tomorrow. Short accounts make long friends!" he declared smilingly, as he helped her to put on her cloak.

Cornelia had dressed with a vivid remembrance of the fact that Captain Guest had never seen her in evening attire, and a determination to secure "a big moment," for his benefit. When an hour or two later he stood at the entrance to the stalls, and caught sight of her seated in the centre of the front row, it seemed at first sight that she was clad entirely in black, but even as he was applauding the choice for the display of ruddy locks and snowy shoulders, she made a sudden movement, and lo! the black was transformed into vivid, glittering green. Now she was conspicuous—too conspicuous, to please his fastidious taste. He could see opera-glasses levelled on her from the boxes overhead, and over the edge of the dress circle. She sat well forward in her stall, with head thrown back, and eyes fixed upon the stage, in absorbed attention. There was no doubting the unconsciousness of the pose; she was as oblivious of the gaze of others as of his own presence, but he felt an irritated longing to muffle her in veils and wrappings; to lift her up and transplant her to the back seat in a box. What business had those idiots to stare at her, as if she were one of the actresses on the stage? He branded the idiots with even stronger titles, the while he continued to follow their example. Surely it was a forgivable sin to be conspicuously attractive; to stand out, vivid and dazzling, from the surrounding throng, whose chief characteristics seemed to be a bleached inanity, and indifference...

Guest stood in the shadow, his deep-set eyes fixed on the girl with unblinking scrutiny. He remembered that such a gaze was said to demand a response where a certain amount of affinity existed between the people involved, and put out his strength to try the truth of the statement in his own case. The proof came almost startlingly soon. Cornelia's head turned over her shoulder, and her eyes lightened with a flash of recognition. She smiled at him, nodded her head, and arched her brows, signalling a message, which he could easily divine to be an invitation to come to speak to her between the acts. When the curtain fell, Mr Moffatt made an immediate rush for the door, and Guest took possession of his seat, devoutly thankful that it did not happen to adjoin that of the other lady of the party.

"I'm very pleased to meet you again! Seems quite a good time since we parted," said Cornelia, gaily. Her hair stood out round her head like a halo of gold, her eyes shone like stars, her cheeks were softly pink. Guest was dazzled by the bizarre beauty of her. She wore no jewels, not so much as a chain round her neck, and the dress by some witchery was black once more, a thin black gauze, heavily jetted. He pointed at it with a curious finger.

"I could have sworn it was green over there! What has happened to turn it into black?"

Cornelia laughed complacently.

"It's meant to change! There are skirts and skirts: ever so many of them, on top of each other, and each one is different. They all get a chance at times. It's the vury latest craze. Mrs Moffatt nearly killed me when she saw it."

"A chameleon effect. I see! Is it supposed to be symbolic?"

"Of me? I guess not! When I've made up my mind, I *stick*! There's no chopping about for this child!"

It was extraordinary how illusion vanished at the sound of the high-pitched, nasal voice. The fairy princess vanished, and in her place sat a flesh-and-blood damsel, composed, complacent, and matter-of-fact. Guest felt again the intrusion of a jarring note. He would have liked Cornelia to welcome him with a flutter of embarrassment, to have seen her eyes droop before his, and hear a quiver in her voice. He wanted to realise that he was the natural head and protector, and she the woman, the weak, clinging creature, whose happy destiny it was to be the helpmeet of man; but as Cornelia herself would have phrased it, there was "no cling to her." It seemed ridiculous to think of protection in connection with a creature so jauntily self-satisfied and independent.

He sat by her side until the conclusion of the interval, but the conversation was forced and uninteresting, and he rose to depart with the depressing consciousness that the interview had been a failure, since it left him less in sympathy with Cornelia than he had been in the afternoon.

On his way to the door, Guest's eyes caught the signal of a warning fan, and he looked up to see one of the boxes occupied by a party of his own friends. He had been too much occupied with Cornelia to look around the audience, but now it was impossible to leave the theatre without going upstairs a few minutes. After the ordinary greetings, complaints of the heat, and comparisons of engagements, followed the inevitable question—

"Who is Miss Rossetti?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your friend in the stalls. The girl with the wonderful hair?"

"She's an American—a Miss Briskett. Over from the States on a short visit. I met her lately down in the country, and we happened to strike the same week for a visit to town."

"Lucky for you! I've been admiring her all night. That hair and skin, and the glittering black-green frock! Quite bewitching! Where is she staying?"

"At the Ritz, with some people she met coming over. She knows no one over here."

The good lady's interest appeased, she turned back to the stage, fluttering her fan to and fro. Attracted by its movement, or by the glances focussed upon her, Cornelia tilted her head upwards, recognised Guest, and whispered to her companion. Mr Moffatt's eyes travelled obediently towards the box, to fasten, not on Guest but on the man by his side. For a moment they widened in unmistakable recognition, before, of set purpose, as it were, they grew blank and lifeless. He bowed slightly to Guest, and turned back to the stage.

The man by Guest's side laughed drily, and followed him out into the corridor.

"Look here, Guest," he said shortly, "if that girl is a friend of yours, and is staying in a hotel here with those people, you'd better advise her to get away as soon as possible! That man's a bad egg. I ran up against him in Marienbad last year. He and his wife made the hotel too hot to hold them, and were politely requested to leave. There was nothing definite proved, but too many shady things to be pleasant. He had an extraordinary facility for winning at cards, and the fair Mrs Schuter—by the way her hair was brown at that time—"

"These people are called Moffatt! Perhaps you are mistaking them for somebody else!" Guest interrupted eagerly: but he knew the futility of his hope before he heard the reply.

"No doubt they have half a dozen aliases! What does it matter what they choose to call themselves. You saw for yourself that the man recognised me just now. Sorry to interfere, you know, and all that, but I'd be nailing sorry to leave any girl I knew in such a caravansary. Thought I ought to tell you!"

"Thanks very much! You are perfectly right. I'll send her off to-morrow," said Guest, firmly. As he walked down the steps again he was smouldering with fury, with an impulse to walk into the theatre, denounce the adventurers to their faces, and bear Cornelia away to a place of safety. For all her assurance, events had proved that she was neither capable of taking care of herself, nor of choosing her own companions. She had been led away by impulse, like other girls; he liked her the more, not the less, for the discovery, and his heart softened at the thought of her disillusion. No use to worry her to-night! Let her have a good night's rest, and to-morrow morning, bright and early, he would go round to the hotel, when Mr and Mrs Schuter, or Moffatt, or whatever their name happened to be, would once more find their quarters too hot to hold them!

## Chapter Twenty.

On returning to the hotel that evening, Mr Moffatt announced that he and his wife had business on hand next morning, which would necessitate an early breakfast, and that once again they would be obliged to leave Cornelia to her own resources. He suggested, however, that they should all meet at Paddington Station at two o'clock, whence they could take train to Maidenhead for an afternoon on the river.

Cornelia hailed the prospect with delight, and mentally dedicated the morning to doing a picture-gallery, and to choosing a suitable present for her aunt and Elma Ramsden. Aunt Soph should have lace; something soft, and smooth, and womanly, to take the place of the prickly steel trimmings which seemed to constitute her one idea of adornment. Elma, dear thing, what should be chosen for her? Not clothes; it would not be good taste to offer another gift of the kind; a piece of jewellery would be best; something good and quiet, and unobtrusive, suitable for the wear of "a nice young girl."

Cornelia chuckled to herself in prospective enjoyment next morning, as she repaired to the private sitting-room of the suite, where breakfast was invariably served. Her host and hostess had already risen from the table and were dressed for walking. Mrs Moffatt stood before the window looking down into the street with a pale and worried expression. Her husband was scribbling at a side table, but jumped up at Cornelia's entrance, as if he had been anxiously awaiting her appearance.

"Ah, good-morning, Miss Briskett! We are just off, but I wanted to settle up with you first. Here's the cheque, with many thanks! Perhaps you will kindly look over it, to see it is all right."

"Oh, Mr Moffatt, you should not have troubled when you were so hustled. It's too good of you!" cried Cornelia, eagerly, her heart warming to the little man for a promptitude in money matters which reminded her of her own beloved Poppar. "Of course it's all right!" She cast a casual glance over the cheque, and broke into a surprised laugh. "It isn't, though! You've paid me too much! I guess I'm not a usurer, to want interest for a single night. It was only two hundred that I lent!"

Mr Moffatt gave an exclamation of irritation.

"And I have made it out for two hundred and fifty! How very annoying! I have advised it to the bank, too, and sent off the letter. I wanted to get through with as much business as possible this morning. The more hurry the less speed! Why on earth could you not give me the right figures, Gertrude?"

He turned upon his wife with an expression of querulous anger, which she treated with her usual cool disdain.

"I *did* tell you, Silas—but, for the land's sake, don't make a fuss! It's simple enough, Cornelia can give me the change in notes, and it will do to pay up one or two odd accounts before we leave. You won't mind, dear, I know; and, see here! I'm fairly rattled this morning, and I want you to help me through. I've written out a list of errands that ought to be done right away, as soon as you've gotten through breakfast. The particulars are down on this list, and I'd be for ever obliged. You ought to get through before one, if you start soon, so meet me at Buzzard's and we'll have lunch together. In case I should be late, don't wait, but just order for yourself, and allow half an hour to get to Paddington. If I'm delayed, I'll go straight there, and look out for you on our platform."

"That'll be all right. I'll stay till you come," Cornelia assented. She had already opened the gold chain bag which hung by her side, and was smoothing-out a roll of notes. "Two fives, two tens; I guess that's all I can do this morning! I'll give you the rest to-night."

"Oh, my, yes; there's no hurry. Thank you, dear; much obliged!" said Mrs Moffatt, lightly, but her expression altered as she spoke. Cornelia wondered if she were imagining a look of disappointment. It *must* be imagination, for of what importance were a trumpery hundred dollars to a woman who daily squandered many times the amount on her own adornment!

After the Moffatts had departed, Cornelia ate her breakfast, and set out in a hansom to accomplish Mrs Moffatt's commissions before proceeding to shop on her own account. She handed the driver the list of addresses which she was asked to visit in town, and wondered at his expression of astonishment; but she wondered no longer as they traversed mile after mile of dreary roadways, to find on arriving at the first destination that as great a distance still separated it from the second on the list. The commissions themselves were trivial and unimportant, at which Cornelia was not surprised after her personal experience of Mrs Moffatt's shopping eccentricities, but when she had wasted a couple of hours driving to and fro for no tangible result, she waxed impatient, determined that she had done enough for the honour of friendship, and that Mrs Moffatt could herself finish the remaining transactions. She therefore directed the driver to take her to the jeweller's shop in Bond Street where she had made her previous purchases, and anticipated a pleasant half hour choosing an ornament which would commend itself to Elma's approval.

The partner in the firm welcomed her with his usual emprossment, mingled with a certain surprise for which she was at a loss to account. Although a keen tradesman, pearl brooches and bangles seemed this morning too trivial matters to engross his attention; he had the air of waiting momentarily to discuss a more important subject, and presently introduced it himself, unable to be longer silent.

"I despatched a messenger to the hotel an hour ago with the emerald necklace! Mrs Moffatt informed him that you were not in at the moment, but would be able to see him at tea-time. She was probably unaware that you intended to call yourself."

"Yes, she was. It doesn't matter a mite. So long as she was there, it's all right," Cornelia replied, turning over the tray of ornaments absently. It seemed odd that Mrs Moffatt should have returned to the hotel after representing that she was obliged to be absent all morning, but no doubt some engagement had fallen through which she had intended to

keep. She had lifted a brooch in her hands and turned towards the window to examine the colour of the pearls, when the jeweller spoke again.

"We were delighted to receive your agreement to take the necklace, for, as Mrs Moffatt had definitely decided that it was beyond her figure, we were on the point of sending it over to our Paris house. I am sure Mr Briskett will not regret this purchase when he sees the quality of the stones."

Cornelia stood stock-still, staring hard at the little pearl brooch, a hundred vague doubts and dreads which had previously been resolutely thrust aside, darting back into her mind with a new and terrible significance. She felt stunned and bewildered, but the predominant sensation was the necessity for caution. She must be certain of what had happened before she presumed to judge. She rallied all her self-possession, and was surprised at the natural sound of her own voice as she replied—

"What makes you speak of my father, Mr Marchant? Did I mention to you at any time that he was fond of emeralds?"

"I believe you did on one occasion, but it was your reference this morning to which I alluded." Mr Marchant drew out his pocket-book and selected one letter from the contents. "This is it, I think. Yes! You say—'I have just received a cable permission from my father, Mr Edward B Briskett, to purchase the emerald necklace.' I was referring to this quotation, rather than any casual remark."

Cornelia leant over the counter and read the words with her own eyes; saw the signature of her own name written below in Mrs Moffatt's handwriting.

"Why, of course! I forgot. I never do remember what I write," she said calmly.

She was sure now; there was no longer any reason for doubt! The everlasting shopping expeditions; the purchase of a succession of worthless trifles; the exploiting of her own wealth, had all been designed to create a confidence which would prepare the way for such a *coup* as the present. And this morning she had been deliberately decoyed out of the way, while the last scene of the comedy was enacted. The messages were plainly a ruse, while the different rendezvous would have provided a further detention, allowing the conspirators plenty of time to decamp.

Once opened, Cornelia's eyes were wonderfully keen. She understood now why the goods which it was inconvenient to harbour in a hotel had been constantly despatched to the keeping of "a friend." She realised that she had been cheated—doubly cheated—in first giving a cheque for two hundred pounds, and afterwards in counting out change for a worthless return.

"I need never fancy myself again after this! I'm just the greenest peach on the wall!" she told herself furiously, but through all the anger and shock, the necessity for caution remained predominant in her mind. Mr Marchant must not suspect that anything was wrong. Even now, at the eleventh hour, the fraud might be prevented. She must get back to the hotel at once; see Mrs Moffatt and reason with her, argue with her, command her to hand over the jewels! The woman was not all bad, and life had gone hardly with her. She should have another chance! Cornelia waived aside all thought of responsibility toward the jeweller himself, by the easy decision to pay for the necklace if necessary, but a sudden feeling of helplessness weighed upon her at the prospect of the interview ahead.

Suppose Mr Moffatt were at the hotel with his wife! Then there would be two to one, and once the outer veneer was broken through, there was no saying to what extremes of abuse, of threatening, even of violence itself, they might descend. Cornelia recalled the two faces; the woman's hard, sullen, coarse; the man's mean and crafty, and shuddered at the prospect.

All at once the thought of Guest occurred, to bring with it a wave of relief. Guest had begged her to summon him if at any time he should be needed; now the need had arisen, and he should help her through.

She hastily selected a pearl bangle and laid it on one side on the counter.

"I will decide on that! Let your man bring it round at five o'clock, and ask to see me personally. He can bring a bill made out for all I owe, and I'll settle at once. And, Mr Marchant, I want to use your telephone! Can you ring and have me switched on to the Army and Navy Club?"

While the preliminary operations were going on at the telephone, Cornelia racked her brain to think of a suitable rendezvous, and failing a better suggestion, decided on a tea-shop exactly across the road. To her immense relief, Guest was found at his club, and announced that he would be with her in ten minutes' time, so that there was nothing to do but to dismiss the hansom, and secure a table in a quiet corner.

The time seemed long, but in reality it was less than ten minutes before Guest seated himself by her side. He looked grave and stern; preoccupied almost to the point of discourtesy, for the ordinary greetings were exchanged for a succession of short, eager questions.

"Where have you been all the morning? Have you been back to the hotel? Did you get my message?"

"I did not! I've been out since about half-past nine. What was the message about? Anything important?"

"Tell me first what you wanted me for just now."

Cornelia paused for a moment and her lips trembled. She clasped her hands together and leant across the little table, staring earnestly into his eyes.

"Captain Guest, I'm in trouble! I've a pretty good opinion of myself as a rule, but—I ken't see it through alone! ... It's going to be one of the meanest businesses you ever touched. ... Will you help me?"



"I will!" said Guest, quietly. "Thank you for asking me. Is it—excuse my asking—anything in connection with Mr and Mrs Moffatt? Ah!" as the girl exclaimed in sharp surprise, "I fancied that last night's meeting might bring things to a crisis. Now, I'll tell you just what happened in that box, and then you must tell me your story."

For the next ten minutes they sat with heads bent close together, exchanging confidences of grave import. Cornelia kept nothing back, and as he listened, Guest's face grew momentarily sterner. The hastily ordered meal lay neglected on the table while they faced the desperate situation with which they had to deal.

Guest took a man's cut-and-dried view of the case, and was strongly in favour of apprising Mr Marchant of what had happened and returning to the hotel, supported not only by him, but by a police officer into the bargain, but Cornelia would not be induced to agree.

"She's done wrong, and she forged my name for her own purposes—there's no getting away from that, but there may be some explanation which will make it look a little less black. Anyway, I'm going to hear it before I judge, and if she'll make things good I'll give her another chance. You don't know what's come before this!"

"I should have little difficulty in guessing, however," Guest said drily.

He thought of the hotel in Marienbad; of the changed name; the dyed hair; and mentally conjured up the dreary life of plotting and scheming, of constant danger, and miserable success, which constitutes the life of the professional adventurer, but Cornelia saw only the haggard face which had looked at her in the sitting-room of the hotel, the face of the woman whose childhood had known no home, whom love had passed by. She heard again the hopeless intonation of the voice which had reminded her—"You'd have to tread the same road yourself, before you could judge me, Cornelia!" Her chin squared with the look of stubborn determination which her aunt already knew so well, and she said firmly—

"Well, anyway, I've got to see her first! If you don't approve, I'll go alone, but I'd like best to have you there."

"Of course I'll come. There's no question about that. We had better get off at once, then, and not waste any more time, but first you must have something to eat! You've been driving about all morning, and there's trouble ahead. I'll ring for something hot and tempting. What would you like best?"

"I couldn't swallow a bite if you paid me for it. It would stick in my throat."

"Have a glass of wine, then! I'm not going to stir till you have something. You look tired out."

"I never touch wine. I think perhaps I could drink some cor-fee!" Cornelia said doubtfully, and Guest's stern face suddenly lightened into a smile.

"Coffee! The worst thing possible for your nerves. You funny little girl! You have not the smallest glimmering of an idea how to take care of yourself."

To his surprise and alarm, two big tears brimmed up suddenly in Cornelia's eyes, and her lips quivered.

"Don't be good to me!" she whispered sharply. "*Don't!* For two straws I'll howl! I'm all worked up. Take me out, out into the street, quick, before I make a scene!"

Guest needed no second bidding. In an incredibly short time the untasted meal was paid for, a hansom summoned, and he was driving once more through the streets by Cornelia's side, while she mopped her eyes with a minute pocket-handkerchief.

"*You* haven't lived with her for days at a time. ... *You* haven't thought of her as a friend. ... *You* haven't had her nurse you, when you were sick!..."

"Thank heaven for that!" ejaculated Guest, devoutly. It was ridiculous to indulge in sentiment in connection with a thief and a forger; the woman deserved no mercy, and would receive none, if he had his way; none the less was he charmed by Cornelia's emotion, by her pity, her amazing inconsistency. Gone were her airs of complacency and independence; at the first threatening of danger the pretty pretence was broken up; weak, trembling, tearful, she summoned her natural protector to her side! Guest's heart swelled with a passion of tenderness. In his immaculate frock-coat, freshly-creased trousers, and irreproachable silk hat, he was as truly a knight-errant at that moment as any mailed warrior of old, going forth to fight a tourney for his lady's favour.

"Don't cry!" he cried eagerly. "Look here, you know, if you want me to let her down lightly, you must pull yourself together. I can't stand this. If you cry any more—I'll—*kill her!*"

Cornelia swallowed dismally, blinking the tears from her eyelids.

"I don't know as it wouldn't be the best way out, as far as she's concerned, but I'd just as lief you didn't *all* turn criminals on my hands! I'll pull myself up once we are there, but I'm all of a flutter thinking it over in advance."

"We'll be there soon now," Guest told her reassuringly.

They drove in silence down the length of Bond Street, and out into the whirl of Piccadilly. Soon, almost too soon for Cornelia's jangled nerves, they had drawn up before the great door of the hotel.

Here nothing of a sensational nature had occurred. The porter touched his cap to Cornelia with his usual stolid air, the clerk bowed with unruffled complacency—no hint of trouble had come to their ears. The lift was full of a laughing, chattering crowd. It seemed to Cornelia almost incredible that these women were repairing to their rooms to deck

themselves for fresh pleasures, while she was about to bring a prisoner to the bar. She turned towards Guest, as he stood by her side, and felt a fresh sense of comfort in his nearness, his bigness, his air of quiet strength.

On the second floor the lift discharged half its occupants—a merry flock for the most part, hurrying along the corridor, laughing and jesting as they went, while two followed gravely behind, looking to right and left with anxious eyes.

The door of Mrs Moffatt's bedroom was closed. Was it already deserted—its drawers and wardrobes despoiled of their treasures; a bundle of worthless trifles left behind?—Cornelia's heart beat in sickening throbs; she knew a coward wish that she might be too late. To pay up and go quietly home seemed an easy way out of the difficulty into which she had walked so blindly!

She drew a quick, frightened breath, and felt Guest's hand press protectingly on her arm. The sitting-room door opened, and side by side they entered the room.

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## Chapter Twenty One.

Mrs Moffatt was standing before the table, tearing up old papers. She looked up with a start, to see Guest and Cornelia standing before her in that eloquent, linked attitude, and over her features there passed that helpless, trapped expression of guilt discovered and brought to bay, which, once seen, can never be forgotten. The blood ebbed from her face, leaving it ashen white, except for two fixed spots of colour on either cheek; her fingers relaxed their hold, and the fragments of paper fluttered downward to the floor. There was a ghastly silence.

It was Guest who was the first to speak, standing straight and stern at the opposite side of the table, and at the sound of his opening words the wretched woman trembled violently, and sank on a chair for support.

"Mrs Schuter! I have come here with Miss Briskett to ask your explanation of a letter sent in her name to Mr Marchant, the jeweller, this morning. She has seen the letter, with the forged signature at the end, and has heard that the necklace was brought to this hotel, and delivered to you. May I trouble you to hand it over?"

Each word was sharp and cutting as an icicle, and Guest's steel-like eyes were alight with remorseless anger. Cornelia turned her head aside, unable to endure the pitiful spectacle. Mrs Moffatt stammered out a broken subterfuge.

"What necklace? I don't know—I don't—understand!"

Even as she spoke, one trembling hand twitched upward, to be as quickly lowered, but not before Guest had pounced upon the clue with swift intuition.

"You understand very well! As a matter of fact, you are wearing it at this moment beneath your dress. Will you kindly take it off, and put it on the table?"

He turned aside as he spoke, paying this small tribute to her womanly feelings. A strangled sob broke the silence; the sound of laboured breathing, then a faint, clicking sound, and he looked round to see a dazzle of light on a corner of the table, where the sunbeams had found a plaything. A bauble of green and white stones, for which a woman had sold her soul.

Cornelia was leaning against the mantelpiece, her face hidden in her hands. Guest realised that it was her sob which he had heard, and the knowledge did not soften his heart.

"Thank you!" he said in the same tone of cutting politeness. "That is so much to the good, but I shall have to trouble you still further. There was two hundred pounds lent to you yesterday, ostensibly to be paid to a furrier, that, of course, was a mere excuse!—and thirty pounds in bank-notes this morning. I fear the first sum is gone beyond recall, since your husband's cheque is probably not worth the paper on which it is written, but I take it that the notes are still intact. As you prefer someone else to pay your bills, you will have kept them for personal use. They are probably in your pocket at this moment!"

"I have not got the cheque—I could not return it if I would," said Mrs Moffatt, hoarsely. "My husband cashed it as soon as the bank was open, and left London shortly after. He has the money. I have not had a cent of it. The notes are in my purse. He left them so that I should be able to follow."

"Just so. You will please return them to Miss Briskett, and we will deal with the other sum later on. Your intention was to leave the hotel for good this morning, and you provided Miss Briskett with commissions to keep her out of the way while you made your preparations. That is the case, is it not?"

The woman did not answer, but looked across the room towards where Cornelia stood; and Cornelia parted her hands and looked back at her in pitiful inquiry.

"Did you mean to run away, and leave me here alone?"

Mrs Moffatt bent her head in shame. Her face was not white now, but deep, burning red.

"We knew—after last night—that the game was up. We *had* to go, Cornelia—or—"

"Be kind enough not to address Miss Briskett by her Christian name!" interrupted Guest, sharply. It seemed to him an impossible humiliation that this woman should still dare to address the girl in the language of friendship. "Let us get

to the end of this business. I presume there are other bills, which will come in, in due course; bills for goods ordered in other forged notes. Am I right in supposing this? It is your best plan to speak the truth!"

"Y-es!"

"There *are* more bills! Can you give me an approximate idea of their amount? Fifty pounds, one hundred, two hundred? What is the amount?"

"About—one hundred."

"And the hotel expenses! Miss Briskett suspects from the manner of the officials that you were thoughtful enough to take these rooms in her name. Again I ask you, is that the case?"

A bend of the head gave assent, and Guest wheeled round with a gesture of intense indignation, took a few rapid strides up and down the room, then halted again by Mrs Moffatt's side.

"And, not content with cheating and plotting to desert this young girl, whom you professed to befriend, how many of her personal possessions have you stolen? You had free access to her room—have you taken advantage of her absence this morning to rob her of her private belongings?"

Two exclamations, of denial, of dismay, and reproach, sounded in his ears. Innocent and guilty alike regarded him with indignant eyes. To the mysterious feminine reasoning it appeared there were different degrees in the crime of theft. To pay a debt by means of a worthless cheque was evidently less reprehensible than to pilfer a brooch from a dressing-table. Guest knew himself condemned before he heard the simultaneous replies.

"Captain Guest, how *can* you! She would never do that!"

"Indeed, you are mistaken. I'm bad enough, but I have not fallen quite so low. I have not touched a thing."

"You must excuse my denseness. I fail to see how one theft is so much worse than the other. I am sorry to seem intrusive, Miss Briskett, but I have taken a certain responsibility upon myself, and I must be satisfied on this point before we go any further. Will you take Mrs Schuter with you to your room while you carefully check your possessions, and get back your bank-notes. I will wait here till you return."

For a moment Cornelia appeared on the point of refusing, but she changed her mind, and without a word led the way down the corridor towards her own bedroom. Her dressing-case stood on a table by the window; she stood over it uncertainly, as if still debating with herself whether she should or should not obey Guest's command, and as she did so Mrs Moffatt's voice broke the silence—

"Cornelia!—there's not a mite of reason why you should take my word, but I tell you straight I haven't laid a finger on one of your things. You ken look as well as not, but it's wasting time. The thirty pounds is in my purse, ready for you to take. When it comes to the last Silas takes fright. There's no need to tell any more lies. We have lived by this sort of thing for years past, but as soon as he scents danger in the air, he makes off to a place of safety, and leaves me to finish up. You won't find him, however hard you search, but I'm right here. ... What are you going to do with me, Cornelia?"

Cornelia drew a sharp, sobbing breath.

"Oh, why did you do it?" she cried wildly. "Why did you do it? You laid a plot for me from the start. I was rich, and— and *green*, so you fussed over me, and acted like a friend, and invited me up here, for nothing but to bleed me—to get as much out of me as you could, and then leave me to face it out alone in a strange place. I was your own countrywoman, and I trusted you. Hadn't you got a spark of loyalty left, that you could act so—*mean*?"

Mrs Moffatt put her hand to her throat. Her voice seemed paralysed; husky, disjointed, and feeble.

"No! It's all gone; loyalty, faith, everything that matters. There's nothing left but *this*! You'd not believe me if I said I was fond of you, Cornelia, but it's the solid truth, though I robbed you all the same. I *plotted* to rob you, as you say! You had plenty of money, and we were cleaned out. I meant to get away with that necklace, and sell the stones on the Continent. There are people there who will buy without asking questions. I've got to know them pretty well during the last few years. ... Cornelia, what are you going to do? Is Mr Marchant sending to arrest me here?"

"He doesn't know that anything is wrong. I managed to keep quiet, and let him believe I knew all about it. To the last I kept hoping that there was some way out. Captain Guest wanted to bring an officer along, but I wouldn't do it."

"That was like you! You wanted I should have a chance, but it's all true; every one thing! There's more true than you know of—other bills to come in, a big sum run up here. You can give back the necklace, but even so, it is going to be heavy enough. ... Cornelia, *what are you going to do*? I'm a bad woman—are you going to send me to prison, to have a chance of growing worse, among other bad women like myself?"

Cornelia threw out her arms with a sudden, reckless gesture.

"*No!*" she cried strongly, "I'm not! I'm going to let you go; I'm going to *help* you to go. Captain Guest's a pretty hard man; I guess you'd better not see him again. Keep those notes—you'll need some money to help along, and march out of the hotel right now, and lose yourself as fast as ever you can. You can have ten minutes to do it, while I wait here, and as much longer as I can keep him quiet; but you've got to be slippy. ... You shall have your chance!"

Mrs Moffatt gasped for breath, her face twitched convulsively, and she tottered as she stood.

"You mean that? Oh, God bless you, Cornelia Briskett! If there are any blessings going, there's no one on earth deserves them more than you. You've saved me this time. Whatever happens in the future, you've given me a chance."

"That's so, but the question is, *are you going to take it?* See here! let's strike a bargain over this before you go! You are a clever woman, or you wouldn't have escaped so long, but the game is played out. It isn't safe to go on, when any moment you may be recognised by people you have fooled before. You're bound to make a fresh start—why shouldn't you try being straight for a change? You'd find it would pay better in the end. You've got to think, when you leave this to-day, that a girl's whim is all there is between you and a prison cell. That ought to be a pretty bracing remembrance, I should say. ... Start away with the money you have in hand, and see if you ken't make some more for yourself. There's another thing! You can write to me in a year from now, and tell me where you are, and what you have been about. I'll ferret into every single thing, and if it's *straight*, I'll help you again; I'll go *on* helping you! You need never say after this that you cheat because you're obliged. Live straight, and work hard, and I'll see to it that you don't want. You've got your chance! ... I guess you'd better scoot!"

Mrs Moffatt stood before her, trembling and abject; overcome with a pitiful emotion.

"I'm going! Could you, could you kiss me, Cornelia, before I go?"

Cornelia drew herself up proudly.

"No, I guess not! We'll leave that over for another time. Some day, perhaps, when you're straight. ... You'd best not waste any more time..."

"I'm going. I can't thank you. I swear to you—"

"No, don't swear! I don't want any promises. Promise *yourself*, that's the best thing. ... Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Cornelia Briskett!"

The door opened, and shut. Cornelia listened with bated breath, but all was silent from the corridor without. She leant her head on the dressing-table, and burst into a passion of tears.

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Captain Guest paced up and down the sitting-room for a quarter of an hour, casting impatient glances at the clock, and pausing now and then to lift the emerald necklace from the table and examine it with wondering curiosity. It was a pretty enough plaything, but from his point of view it seemed a preposterous waste of money to sink a cool thousand pounds on its purchase. He mentally ran over the various necessary repairs on his own property, which could be completed for the sum, and shrugged his shoulders expressively. Still, women liked such playthings, and if one were specially interested in a woman (a woman, say, to whom emeralds were specially becoming!), there would be a certain satisfaction in seeing her wearing the pretty things. It was conceivable that the pleasure so given might even be as keen as that derived from a new chimney-stack or a barn!

A vision rose before him; a vision of a ruddy head and snowy shoulders, on which the green light flashed and waned. He saw Cornelia, as she had appeared, sitting in the front row of the stalls at the theatre, and mentally clasped the necklace round her throat.

The door opened. He thrust the vision aside, and wheeled round quickly, reassuming his sternest expression. A dejected little girl stood on the threshold, with dishevelled locks and tear-stained eyes, and as he stared in amazement, she quietly closed the door, and collapsed in a limp little heap on the corner of the sofa.

"I've—come back!"

"Where's Mrs Moffatt?"

"She's"—the voice broke in a strangled sob—"gone!"

"Gone *where?*"

"Gone away. Ten minutes ago. She's ever so far off by now!"

Guest stood still, transfixed with anger and astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that she escaped before your eyes? What happened? Did you leave her alone in your room?"

"No; I told her to go. I sent her away. It was my suggestion from the start."

"You—told—her—to go!" Guest's face was a study of outraged wrath. "After all she has done; after the deliberate way in which she has cheated and deceived you; after the lies she has told; after her thefts,—hundreds of pounds still to pay up! after intending to desert you in this hotel, you mean to tell me seriously that you *sent* her away!"

The tousled head nodded dumbly; two big tears trickled down the reddened cheeks.

"Are you aware that you have compounded a felony? If Mr Marchant heard what you had done, he could accuse you of being a partner in the crime. Do you know that you have broken the law of the country, and that I could give you in charge at this moment, if I wished to do so?"

"I guess that's so.—Are you going to do it?"

"That's ridiculous! You know it is, but—"

"Then you're another!" cried Cornelia, laughing through her tears. "You're as bad as I am, so you can't preach! She's gone anyway, and I'm—*glad!* We got the necklace, and for the rest, I'll just have to pay up, and look pleasant. Poppar says you've got to pay for experience in this world. I'll tell him I concluded I'd better learn it pretty thoroughly, once I'd started. He won't mind."

"Your father must be a wealthy man if he can afford to lose four or five hundred pounds without feeling annoyed!"

Cornelia looked at him quickly, and replied in a tone of studied indifference.

"Oh, he's flush enough at the moment. Likely enough we shall be paupers next year. Don't be angry with me, Captain Guest. I simply *had* to give her a chance! I can afford to pay up, and if I'd sent her to prison it would have killed the last little mite of self-respect. I trusted her instead, and I believe that's going to help more than any punishment. It would *me!* She's had a good old fright, and maybe this will be the turning-point in her life."

Guest's lips curled in eloquent disbelief. He paced slowly up and down the room, then stationed himself once more in front of the sofa.

"Did you look over your things to see that they were all right?"

"No! ... She said she hadn't touched them."

"Did you make her return the notes?"

"No, I—I guessed she'd need them herself!"

"How extremely considerate! Didn't you feel it necessary to offer her a little more, while you were about it? To give her another twenty pounds, say, to make up the full change for the cheque?"

The face that peered up at him was at once so abashed, so discomfited, so childlike in its humility, that his anger melted before it, and gave place to a wave of tenderness.

"You ridiculous, high-flown, little girl! Who would have believed that all your shrewd commonsense would collapse like this! No! I'm not angry, I shan't scold any more. The thing's done now, and you've had enough worry. I'm going to ring the bell, and order some luncheon. We will have it here together, and comfort ourselves after all this excitement. I'm hungry enough, whatever you are! What shall it be? You are going to treat me, you know, so it must be something good. Roast chicken! That's what ladies generally prefer, and some sweets, and fruit. Claret for me, and what for you? Is it to be—'corfee'—once more?"

He went to the door to give the order to the waiter, accompanied by a tip which had the effect of producing the meal in an extraordinarily short space of time. Cornelia's appearance being still distinctly dishevelled, Guest dismissed the waiter and himself took the head of the table, carving the chicken, handing the vegetable dishes, and even pouring out the coffee. If they had been a honeymoon couple the intimacy of the scene could not have been greater, but in that case he would have taken his wife in his arms and kissed away her tears. Poor, little, red-eyed girl! There was precious little beauty about her at the moment, yet she had never appeared more attractive.

"I ken't eat a bite!" was Cornelia's first melancholy statement, but when one wing of the chicken had disappeared from her plate—"It's mighty good!" she said, and promptly set to work on a second. She drank copious draughts of coffee, began to revive in spirits, and experience qualms concerning her appearance. "Say! do I look a perfect freak?"

"You look much better than you did ten minutes since. In another ten minutes you will look quite like yourself, if you obey my orders, and eat a good meal."

Cornelia shrugged expressively.

"I know what that means! I guess I'm ugly enough to kill. That's why I hate to cry—it musses one up so for hours after. ... Captain Guest, what am I going to do next? Can I settle up, and get away to Norton this afternoon, do you suppose?"

"I am afraid not. The last train leaves at three o'clock, and that does not give enough time for all that has to be done. I was wondering whether my aunt—whether you would consent to sleep at her house to-night."

"Suttenly not! Why should I? It won't be the first time by a good many that I've stayed a night by myself in a hotel, and there's no reason why I should move. I'll have my meals up in this room, if it will ease you any, but I won't leave this place till to-morrow morning. Then I'll go back," she laughed feebly, "to The Nook, and humble pie!"

"You need not tell your aunt what has happened, if you don't choose to do so!"

"Oh, yes; I'll own up! Aunt Soph will be pleased to feel she was right. Maybe she'll like me better when I'm down on my luck. ... What must I set about first?"



"Cornelia sprang to her feet, clapping her hands with delight. 'How lovely! How lovely! You're just the nicest thing!' " (see page 279).

"I shall interview the hotel manager, and tell him the whole story—that's due to him, you know, or there might be a repetition of the offence. Then there's the jeweller—he must be warned in the same way, and the necklace returned. I presume you don't want to keep it."

Cornelia shuddered.

"Oh, no. I could never wear it. But when Poppa comes over I'll make him buy me something else instead. Mr Marchant shan't lose! I guess I'd better drive there straight away, and then to the bank. I'll have to arrange for a pretty big draft. ... You never know how things are going to pan out in this world, do you? I thought I was going to spend this afternoon on the river, gliding about so sweet and peaceful!"

Guest flushed, hesitated, and—plunged!

"Why shouldn't we go all the same? We can finish our business and still have time. If you will allow me, I'll take great care of you and bring you home before it's dark. It would be too dreary sitting up here by yourself, all the evening."

Cornelia sprang to her feet, clapping her hands with delight.

"How lovely! How lovely! You're just the nicest thing! It's sweet of you to think of it! Go right away now, and get through with your interview, and I'll join you in the lounge as soon as I've prinked, and gotten my face into order. I'll hang my head out of the window, and massage my nose. ... Let's go and be happy, and forget all our woes!"

She ran to the door, waved her hand gaily over her shoulder, and disappeared from sight.

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

When Guest drove round to the hotel next morning to escort Cornelia to the station, she was surprised to see his own bag on the roof, and to hear that he intended to accompany her all the way to Norton.

"I want to make sure that you are safely housed once more," he explained as they drove off. "I feel a certain responsibility for you, and I think perhaps your aunt would like to see me, and hear from a second person that everything is satisfactorily settled here."

"My aunt," said Cornelia, demurely, "my aunt isn't a mite disposed to acknowledge your responsibility. She thinks you're 'dashing'! She don't approve of dashing young men. She warned me specially to avoid you."

"Humph! dashing, am I? The word has an Early Victorian sound that suggests side-whiskers and leg-of-mutton trousers. I'm not at all sure that I'm flattered!" returned Guest, as he alternately stared out of the window, and busied himself in arranging the bags on the front seat of the cab.

There was an air of embarrassment in his manner this morning, and he talked against time, as if anxious not to let the conversation come to a pause. The afternoon on the river had been a delightful experience, abundantly proving

the truth of his prophecy that it would be impossible to be bored in Cornelia's society. She had looked very sweet in her softened mood, and as they drifted down the stream together, had prattled away in simple, confiding fashion, telling him the story of her life; of the ups and downs which she and her Poppar had known together; of her own individual adventures. He learnt that she was not engaged, and had never been in love, though there were always heaps of admirers "prancing" round. She intended to marry some day, however. Why, suddenly! Just as soon as ever the right man hove along. What was the good of being a woman, if you didn't have your own home, and your own husband and children! Then she looked at him with her clear, golden eyes, and inquired how it was with himself. Was he in love?

"No!" answered Guest, but, even as he spoke, he knew in his heart that he lied. In the guise of a Yankee stranger, who embodied in herself all the traits which he most condemned, the one woman of his life had appeared. He loved—and the woman whom he loved was Cornelia Briskett!

After that, conversation languished. Guest was too much bewildered by the sudden realisation of his position to wish to talk, and Cornelia had developed a headache as a result of the morning's emotion. She was glad to be quiet; to allow herself to be led about, and cared for, and told what she must do.

"Just like a 'nice young girl!'" she said, laughingly as they parted in the lounge of the hotel. "If I lived over here long enough—there's no telling—I might grow into a Moss Rose myself!"

"I wish you would! I wish you would! Won't you try?" Guest cried eagerly. He, himself, did not know what he really meant by the inquiry, for the words had sprung to his lips almost without thought. He was as much startled by the sound of them as was Cornelia herself. He saw the dismay in her eyes, the dawning comprehension; he saw something else also—the first flicker of self-consciousness, the first tell-tale droop of the lids. She put him off with a light answer, and he went out to pace the streets until the night closed around him. ... What was this that had happened, and what was it going to mean? One week—a week to the day since he had first met this girl and conceived a violent dislike to her on the spot. Voice, accent, and manner had alike jarred on his nerves: she had appeared in every respect the opposite to the decorous, soft-voiced, highly-bred, if somewhat inane, damsel who represented his ideal of feminine charm. One week ago! What magic did she possess, this little red-haired, white-faced girl, to make such short work of the scruples of a lifetime? What was this mysterious feminine charm which blinded his senses to everything but just herself, and the dearness of her, and the longing to have her for his own? The jarring element had not disappeared, the difference of thought still existed, but for the moment he was oblivious of their existence. For the first time in his three-and-thirty years he was in love, and had room for no other thought.

The morning brought colder reflections. When—supposing he ever married, it would be wormwood and gall to see his wife condemned by his friends! He had looked forward to espousing the daughter of some irreproachable county family, and returning to his old home to live in frugal state for the rest of his life; driving to church in the old barouche, attending a succession of dull, country-house dinners; taking the chair at village meetings. He tried to imagine Cornelia spending long, peaceful years as the squire's wife, contentedly pottering about the village, superintending Dorcas meetings, and finding recreation in occasional garden parties, where the same people met the same people, attired in the same frocks, and sat meekly in rows, drinking claret cup and sour lemonade, but the effort failed. Cornelia obstinately refused to fit into the niche. He could summon up a vision of her, indeed, but it was a disconcerting vision, in which she "pranced round," while the neighbourhood turned its back, and pursed disapproving lips.

He was attracted by the girl—seriously attracted, *but*— It was a great big *but*, and he promised himself to be cautious, to think long and well before taking the plunge. All the same, it seemed imperative that he should return to Norton. His aunt was always delighted to put him up, and he could not be happy until he had satisfied himself that all was well with Cornelia once more. Incidentally also, he was interested to know what was happening at the Manor.

On the journey to Norton the presence of fellow-travellers kept the conversation necessarily impersonal, and at the station Cornelia dismissed her escort, refusing point blank to drive with him to the Park.

"I'm going back as a sorrowing penitent, and it don't suit the part to drive up with a dashing young man. There are only two players in this act, and they are Aunt Soph and myself. You come round in the evening, when I've paved the way."

"Till to-night, then!" said Guest, raising his hat. Once again, as he looked at her through the window of the cab, the clear eyes wavered before his own; once again his scruples vanished. He loved, and the world held nothing but that glad fact.

Cornelia exhibited much diplomacy in her interview with her aunt. Seated at the good lady's feet in an attitude of childlike humility, she related the story of her adventures in simple, unexaggerated language, without any attempt at self-justification.

"I ought to have guessed from the start; but it seems I'm not as smart as I thought. They had me, the whole way through. You were right, you see, and I was wrong. I should have taken your advice. Guess it will be a lesson to me!"

"I trust it may prove so, my dear! a dearly-bought, but invaluable lesson!" quoth Miss Briskett, blandly. So far from being incensed, she actually purred with satisfaction, for had not the truant returned home in a humble and tractable spirit, ready to acknowledge and apologise for her error? Her good humour was such that she bore the shock of hearing of Guest's rôle in the drama with comparative composure.

"He seems," she declared, "to have comported himself with considerable judgment, but, my dear Cornelia, if anything more were needed to demonstrate the necessity for caution and restraint in the future, it must surely be the remembrance that you were driven into such intimate relationship with a man whose acquaintance you had made but a few short days before! It seems to me that the recollection must be painfully embarrassing to any nice young

girl.”

“Yes, ‘um!” said Cornelia, meekly. She lowered her eyelids, and her cheeks flushed to a vivid pink. Such a typical picture did she make of a modest and abashed young girl, that the spinster’s stern face relaxed into a smile, and she laid her hand affectionately upon the ruddy locks.

“There! there! We will say no more about it—

“‘Repentance is to leave  
The sins we loved before;  
And show that we in earnest grieve  
By doing so *no more!*’

“Another time you will be guided by wiser counsels!”

“...Have you missed me, Aunt Soph, while I’ve been away?”

“Er—the house has seemed very quiet,” replied Miss Briskett, truthfully. “I am sorry that I am obliged to leave you this afternoon, my dear, but I have promised to attend a committee meeting at four o’clock. You will be glad to rest after your journey, and to unpack and get your things put neatly away.”

“Has Elma come home?”

“She returned yesterday morning. I saw the dog-cart from the Manor waiting outside the gate this morning. Mrs Ramsden told me the other day that Elma’s health was completely restored.”

Cornelia pondered over these scanty items of news as she sat at her solitary tea an hour later. Elma was well; Elma had returned home. A dog-cart from the Manor had been observed waiting outside the gate of The Holt that morning. A dog-cart! Imagination failed to picture the picturesque figure of Madame perched on the high seat of that undignified vehicle. If the cart had not conveyed the mother, it must, in all probability, have conveyed the son. The dog-cart had been *waiting!* The deduction was obvious to the meanest intellect. Geoffrey Greville had driven down to see Elma the morning after her departure, and had spent a considerable time in her society!

Suddenly Cornelia realised that her anxiety could brook no delay, and that it would be impossible to spend another night without discovering how the Moss Rose had fared during her absence. She despatched Mary to The Holt with a verbal message to the effect that she had returned from town, and, if convenient, would much like to see Miss Ramsden for a few minutes before six o’clock, and while she was still at tea the answer was received; a note this time, written in pencil, and bearing marks of haste and agitation.

“Dearest Cornelia,—Yes, of course! I *am* thankful you are back. Come right up to my room. It’s perfectly wretched here, but I’m so happy! Elma.”

Cornelia rolled her eyes to the ceiling, and indulged in an expressive whistle. Contradictory as Elma’s epistle might have appeared to an ordinary reader, she understood it readily enough. It was Mrs Ramsden who was wretched, Elma who was happy—“*so happy,*” despite the atmosphere of disapproval. The crisis had arrived!

In five minutes’ time, Cornelia was in her friend’s room, holding her hands, gazing into her face, kissing her flaming cheeks.

“Elma, *is* it? It is! I can see it in your face! Oh, you dear thing! When? How? I’m crazy to know. Tell me every single thing.”

Elma laughed; a delicious little laugh of conscious happiness.

“Yes, yes, it is! Oh, Cornelia, isn’t it wonderful? I can’t believe it! It’s partly your doing, you know, and I love you for that, but doesn’t it seem impossible that he can really care for—*me!*” She turned her exquisite, flower-like face towards her friend, with an expression of humility as sweet as it was sincere. “He might have had anybody, and he chooses—*me!* Oh, Cornelia, I never knew that one could live, and be so happy! It seems like a dream.”

“Wake up, then, and get down to facts! I’m crazy to hear all about it. When was it settled?”

“This morning.”

“Only this morning! I calculated it would come off Monday at latest.”

“No, it didn’t. Of course he was very—I mean, I knew—we both understood, but Geoffrey says he couldn’t possibly have spoken plainly while I was a guest under his own roof. It wouldn’t have been the right thing. He was obliged to wait till I got home!”

“My! how mediaeval. I should have thought Geoffrey Greville had more snap to him, than to hang on to such worn-out notions. Fancy letting you go away, and driving down in cold blood next morning! It’s the dullest thing!”

“It’s not dull at all!” contradicted Elma, hotly. “It’s noble, and manly, and self-sacrificing. I love him for it—

“‘I could not love thee, dear, so much  
Loved I not honour more!’”

“Shucks!” sniffed Cornelia, scornfully. “I’d as lief have a little less high-falutin’, and a lot more push. I wouldn’t mind if



it was his house ten times over, I'd want him to feel he couldn't wait another five minutes, and settle it off, so's we could have a good time together. If he let me come away, not knowing if he were in fun or earnest, I'd have led him a pretty dance for his pains. But you're so meek; I bet you dropped into his mouth like a ripe plum!"

Elma drew herself up with a charming dignity.

"I told him the truth without any pretences, if that is what you mean," she said quietly. "I am perfectly satisfied with Geoffrey's behaviour, and I'd rather not discuss it, Cornelia, please. We may seem old-fashioned to you, but we understand each other, and there is not a thing—not a single thing—I would wish altered. I am perfectly, utterly happy!"

"Bless you, you sweet thing, I see you are, and I'm happy for you! Never mind how it happened; it *has* happened, and that's good enough. ... How's Mrs Ramsden bearing up?"

Elma's face fell. For a person who had just proclaimed herself completely happy, she looked astonishingly worried and perturbed.

"Oh, my dear, such a scene! I took Geoffrey in to see her, and she couldn't have been more horrified if he had been the most desperate character in the world. She refused to listen to a word. You would not have recognised mother, she was so haughty and distant, and—rude! Some things she said were horribly rude. After he went, she cried! That was the worst of all. She cried, and said she had given her whole life for me for twenty-three years, and was I going to break her heart as a reward? I cried, too, and said, No, I should love her more, not less, but she wouldn't listen. She said if I married Geoffrey it would be as bad as a public refutation of all the principles which I had professed since childhood. Then she called him names, and I got angry. We didn't speak a word all through lunch, and as soon as it was over she sent for a fly to drive to the Manor. She's there still!"

"Shut up with Madame, hatching the plan of campaign! Madame won't like it any better, I suppose!"

Elma flushed miserably.

"No; she's against us, too! Geoffrey told her what he was coming for, and— isn't it curious?—she was quite surprised! She had not suspected a bit, and I'm afraid she was pretty cross. Geoffrey wouldn't let me say it, but I know she doesn't think me good enough. I'm not; that's quite true. No one knows it better than I."

"If you say that again, I'll shake you! You're a heap too good for the best man that ever lived. Mind now, Elma, don't start out on this business by eating humble pie! You've got to hold up your end of the stick for all you're worth, and let them see you won't be sat upon. When you feel redooced, go and sit in front of the glass for a spell, and ask yourself if he won't be a lucky man to have that vista across the table all the rest of his life. Don't be humble with *him*, whatever happens! Make him believe he's got the pick of the bundle!"

"He—he does!" said Elma, and blushed again. "It makes me ashamed to hear him talk about me, for I know I am really so different. He would not have thought me so sweet if he had heard me scolding mother this morning. Poor mother! I'm so terribly sorry for her. It must be hard to care for a child for twenty-three years, as she says, and then have to step aside for a stranger. I sympathised with every word she said, and knew that I should have felt the same. My head was with her all the time, but my heart"—she clasped her hands to her side with the prettiest of gestures—"my heart was with Geoffrey! Reason's not a bit of use, Cornelia, when you're in love."

"Well!" said Cornelia, firmly, "my heart's got to wait and behave itself, until my head goes along at the same pace. I've not kept it in order for twenty-three years to have it weaken at the last moment. I'll stick to my guns, whatever it may cost."

Elma looked at her with surprised curiosity.

"Why, you talk as if, as if you were in love, too! I wish you *were*! We could sympathise with each other so beautifully. *Are you in love, Cornelia? You never said so before.*"

Cornelia turned to the window and gazed out on the forbidden grass of the Park. Her face was hidden from view, and she answered by another question, put in slow, thoughtful tones.—"What is love? You seem to feel pretty certain that yours is the genuine article. Define it for me! How do you feel when you are in dear Geoffrey's society?"

"Happy! so wonderfully happy that I seem to walk on air. Everything seems beautiful, and I love everybody, and long to make them as happy as myself. Nothing troubles me any more. It seems as if nothing could *ever* trouble me. Geoffrey's there! He is like a great big rock, which will shelter me all my life."

"Do you feel one moment that it's the cutest thing in the world to sit right there in the shade and be fussed over, and the next as if you wanted to knock the rock down *flat*, and march away down your own road? Do you feel blissful one moment and the next all worked up, and fit to scratch? When he's kinder big and superior, and the natural protector, do you feel ugly; or inclined to cave in, and honour and obey?"

Elma stared at her with shocked blue eyes.

"Of *course* I'll obey! Geoffrey is so wise and clever. He knows so much better than I. I'm only too thankful to let him decide for us both. You talk so strangely, Cornelia; I don't understand—"

Cornelia swung round quickly, and kissed her upon the cheek.

"Never mind, sweetling!" she said fondly, "don't *try* to understand! You are better off as you are. It is women like you who have the best time in the world, and are the most loved. I wish I were like you, but I'm not, so what's the use of

repining. I am as I wor' created!"

She laughed, but the laugh had a forced, unnatural sound. Elma saw with dismay a glimmer of tears in the golden eyes.

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

For a whole week the battle raged; the battle between youth and age, love and the world. Elma pleaded for patience and self-restraint, Geoffrey urged defiance and independence; Mrs Ramsden quoted Scripture, and made constant reference to serpents' teeth, while Madame remained charmingly satirical, refusing to treat the matter otherwise than as a joke, laughing at Geoffrey's rhapsodies, and assuring him that he was suffering from an attack of sun, from which recovery would be swift and certain. Rupert Guest and Cornelia hurried to and fro on the outskirts of the fray, in the character of aides-de-camp carrying messages, and administering encouragement and consolation. Every morning Cornelia sat in conclave with her friend in the prosaic Victorian drawing-room which took the place of the turret chamber of romance. Elma would not condescend to hold stolen interviews with her lover, while both families so strongly opposed the engagement, so she shut herself up in the house, growing daily whiter and thinner, wandering aimlessly from room to room, and crying helplessly upon her bed. It was as a breath of fresh mountain air when Cornelia appeared upon the scene, bearing always the same terse, practical advice—"Make sure of your own mind, and—*stick* to it!"

The colour came back to Elma's face as she listened, and hope revived in her heart. She declared anew that nothing in the world should separate her from Geoffrey; that she would be true to him to the last day of her life. Cornelia repeated these touching vows in conclave with Guest behind the shrubbery of the Park, and then he went off post-haste to the Manor, to cheer Geoffrey with the news of the steadfast loyalty of his *fiancée*. Second-hand assurances soon pall, however, on the youthful lover, and after a week had passed by, Geoffrey suddenly waxed desperate, and announced that he would not submit to the separation for another hour. He was perfectly capable of choosing his own wife, Elma was of age, and at liberty to decide for herself. He would go down to The Holt that very afternoon and have it out with the old lady, once for all. If his mother liked to accompany him, so much the better. She and Mrs Ramsden could each have their say, and then he and Elma would have theirs. For his part he warned them that no arguments could move him from his point, but they might see what they would do with Elma! Perhaps they could persuade Elma to give him up!

He smiled as he spoke, in proud, self-confident fashion, but Madame looked at him thoughtfully, smoothed the ruffles on her sleeves, and replied in her sweetest tones—

"Dear boy, yes! quite a good idea. Let us talk it over like sensible people. Elma has such truly nice feelings.—I feel sure we may trust her decision!"

Geoffrey sat him down forthwith to indite a letter to his love, warning her of the ordeal ahead in a couple of lines, and enlarging on his own devotion for the rest of the sheet, which missive was entrusted to Guest when he paid his daily visit to the Manor. "I mean to put an end to this nonsense, once for all," the Squire declared firmly. "You must be sick of trotting to and fro with these everlasting messages, but there won't be any more need for them after to-day."

Guest expressed his gratification, and started forth on his return journey profoundly depressed in spirit. With the end of the strife would end his daily meetings with Cornelia, which alone kept him in Norton. Miss Briskett's attitude on the occasion of his one call at The Nook had not encouraged him to repeat the experiment. He smiled to himself whenever he recalled the picture of the heavily-furnished room, the sharp-faced spinster, with her stiff, repellent manner, and the slim figure of Cornelia sitting demurely in the background, drooping her eyes to the ground whenever her aunt looked in her direction, and wrinkling her nose at him in pert little grimaces when the good lady's back was turned, so that he had had hard work to preserve his gravity. Since that evening they had met daily in the shrubbery of the Park, though only for a few minutes at a time, for Cornelia steadily refused to sit down, or to linger by his side in a manner which would suggest that the assignation was on her behalf, as well as that of her friend.

Guest was always the first to arrive at the meeting-place, and was careful to remain standing in a position from which he could watch the girl's approach. In these bright summer days Cornelia was invariably dressed in white, her short skirts standing out above her feet in a manner peculiar to herself, and the fashion plates. She wore shady hats which dipped over her face, and curved upward at the sides, showing the burnished waves of her wonderful hair. At first sight she gave the impression of looking pale and ill, but invariably by the time she reached his side, her cheeks were pink, and he forgot his anxiety in delight and admiration.

To-day his manner was less buoyant than usual, as he delivered the note into her hands.

"An ultimatum at last! Geoffrey and Madame propose to storm the citadel this afternoon. Quite time, too! I wonder he has waited so long. I should have come to blows on the second day. ... Fancy hanging about a whole week when a girl like that was waiting to see you!"

Cornelia turned the letter round and round, staring at it the while with absent eyes.

"You used to say that he would never marry her ... that she was not a suitable wife ... that it would be a great mistake if he did..."

"I used to say a great many foolish things," said Guest, quietly. "I didn't know what I was talking about, you see. Now I do! If she is the woman he loves, all the little differences go for nothing. I hope he will marry her, and I believe that they will be happy—"

Cornelia twirled to and fro on the heels of her pointed shoes, and tilted her chin with a pretence at indifference.

"Well! I guess it won't help things on if I hang about gossiping here. She ought to have this letter at once, to think out what she's going to say. Poor little Elma! She'll have a rough time with those two mammas firing away at her at the same time. Mrs Ramsden will plump for principle, and Madame for convention. It doesn't seem to either of *them* that love is enough! They both believe they know a heap better what's good for the young people than they do themselves. *And they've been through it!* You can't get away from that. ... They've been through it, and away at the other end they are going to do all they know to prevent their own son and their own daughter from the folly of marrying for love!..."

"People—some people—seem to keep no memory of youth in middle age! It's a pity, for it destroys their influence. In the end, however, it is the young people who decide. ... These two ought to know their own minds, for it has not been a hurried affair. They have known each other for years, and have been more and more attracted. That is a duty which a man and a woman owe to each other in these circumstances—to make sure that what they are offering is real and lasting! I suppose only time can prove this. ... We shall see what this afternoon brings forth. In any case I am needed no longer.—I thought of going north to-morrow morning to pay a couple of visits."

The hand that was playing with the letter was still for a moment, and an almost imperceptible quiver straightened the white figure. For a moment Guest saw, or imagined that he saw, a shadow flit across the girl's face, but it passed as quickly as it came. She tilted her head, and said calmly—

"I guess you're right! We've done our turn, and now they've got to fend for themselves. I hope you'll have a real good time. ... Mr Greville will let you know when the wedding's fixed!"

"Oh, I shall be back at the end of three or four weeks, before there's any talk of dates, I expect! I shall see you again in July." He paused, looking at her with sudden uneasy suspicion. "You will be here in July? There is no chance that you may be away paying other visits?"

Cornelia shook her head.

"I have no other relations over here. So far as I know at present, I shall stay on here until Poppar comes over to fetch me. We're going to fly round together for two or three months after that."

Guest drew a sigh of relief, but as he took Cornelia's outstretched hand in his own to say good-bye, he added a hesitating request—

"If for any unexpected reason you should be leaving Norton during the next three or four weeks, will you let me know? A line to my club will always be forwarded. If there were any uncertainty about seeing you again, I—" his voice lost its level tone, and became husky and disconnected. "These visits don't matter.—I could put them off.—I am *making* myself go, because..." His fingers tightened over hers in involuntary appeal, "Cornelia! I wonder if you understand what is in my mind?"

She looked into his kindled face with serious, unwavering eyes. For a moment it appeared as if she had some difficulty in managing her voice, but when she spoke it was calm and self-possessed as ever.

"I understand that you've been a real true friend to me, Captain Guest, and I'm grateful for all the good times we've had together... That's all we need worry about to-day. Elma is waiting! I mustn't keep her longer. ... Good-bye again! I wish you a real pleasant time!"

She drew her hand from his, gently enough, yet with a determination which could not be opposed. In her voice there was the same note of finality; the composure of her pale, fixed look checked the words on Guest's lips, and left him chilled and wondering.

"For three weeks, then!" he murmured softly, but no echoing assurance came in reply.

Cornelia carried the all-important message to Elma in her den, cheered her with affectionate prophecies, and hurried back to the shelter of her own bedroom. Safe behind locked doors she stood before the mirror on her dressing-table, staring at her own reflection with the implacable air of a judge regarding a prisoner at the bar. The slight figure was held proudly erect, the lips set in a straight, hard line, but the eyes—poor tell-tale woman's eyes!—the eyes wavered, and on the white cheeks flamed two patches of rosy red. Cornelia turned on her heel, and, crossing the room to her writing-table, tore open a letter which lay there already addressed to her father in America. It was a long, cheerfully-written epistle, containing constant references to his coming, and to the good time which they were to enjoy together. With deliberate fingers she tore it in pieces and dropped the fragments into the waste-paper basket. The missive, which was written in its stead was short, and to the point—

"My old Poppar!—This is just a business note that has got to be attended to in a hurry. Well-brought-up-parents do what they're told, and ask no questions. There are breakers ahead over here. They don't concern Aunt Soph; I've broken the back of that worry, and we get along a treat. Heart trouble, daddy! Symptoms unfavourable, and ultimate collapse preventable only by speedy change of scene.

"Sit down straight away and write a letter I can show round, summoning me home by the first boat! You can call it an 'urgent crisis.' It's as true as taxes, though not in the way they take it. I've got to run, and that's all there is to it. Our jaunt must wait till another day. You must comfort me, Poppar,—you and America!—Your lonesome, Cornelia."

She did not pause to read over what she had written, but, fastening it in an envelope, pealed the bell, which brought Mary running blithely to her service. For once, however, the devoted slave ventured to raise a feeble objection.

"*Now*, Miss Cornelia? I'm in the middle of my silver. It will go just as soon if it's posted by half-past three!"

Cornelia glanced at her with the air of an offended goddess.

"I said now, and I *mean* now! This instant, before you touch another one thing. Post it with your own hands, and come up here to tell me it's done!"

Mary vanished in a whirl of starched cotton skirts, rushed to the pillar-box at the corner of the Park, and in five minutes' time was back at the bedroom door to proclaim her obedience. Cornelia was still standing in the middle of the room. It appeared to the maid that she had not altered her position by as much as an inch since she had seen her last. Her expression was tense with expectation.

"It's gone, miss! I put it in myself!"

The golden eyes regarded her strangely.

"Did you, Mury?" said Cornelia, low. She paused a moment as though to form some expression of acknowledgment, but it did not come. "Some time," she continued slowly, "some time, Mury, I believe I'm going to thank you very much, but to-day I don't feel like gushing. ... You can go back to your work."

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

"I suppose I must give them tea!" was Mrs Ramsden's comment upon hearing of the visit which had been planned for the afternoon. Her depression was broken by a struggling sense of elation, for it was not every day that Madame deigned to accept hospitality from her neighbours. She despatched a messenger to the confectioner's to purchase a pound of plum cake, a muffin, and half a pound of macaroons, the invariable preparations under such circumstances, and gave instructions that the best silver and china should be brought out of their hiding-places, with the finest tablecloth and d'oyleys. At three o'clock Elma discovered her removing the covers from the drawing-room cushions, and folding them neatly away in the chiffonier. Something in the simple action touched the girl, and broke down the hard wall of reserve which had risen between her mother and herself during the past painful week. She stretched out impulsive arms, and stooped her head to kiss the troubled face.

"You funny little mother! What do cushions matter? Geoffrey will never notice them, and Madame"—she hesitated, unwilling to hurt her mother's feelings by hinting at Madame's opinion of the satin splendours so carefully preserved from sight—"Madame won't care! ... She is not coming to admire fancy-work!"

Mrs Ramsden lifted a flushed, tear-stained face to look at her daughter standing before her, lovely and slender in the blue muslin gown which had been Cornelia's gift. The daintiness of the dress, its unaccustomed smartness and air of fashion, seemed at the moment a presage of the threatened separation. At the sight, and the sound of the softened voice, the tears streamed afresh, and she cried brokenly—

"Elma! Elma! My child! I beg you at the eleventh hour—think! consider! remember all that I have striven to teach you! ... You have prayed to resist temptation—what is the use of your prayers if they don't avail you in your hour of need? Elma, I know it will be hard! Don't think I shall not suffer with you—but if it is right. ... There is no happiness, my child, if we depart from the right course!"

"I know it, mother," said Elma, calmly. "If you or Madame can convince me that I should be doing wrong in marrying Geoffrey I will give him up! I promise you that, and you must promise me in return that you will try to see things from our point of view as well as your own. Remember, it's my life that is at stake, and I'm so young! I may have such a long time to live. Some girls have a dozen fancies before they are twenty-three, but I have never thought of anyone else. ... From the first time that I met Geoffrey I knew that he was the one man for me. You have been happily married yourself, mother! Could you bear to spoil our happiness?"

Mrs Ramsden winced at the sound of that significant little pronoun, which now, for the first time in twenty-three years, failed to include herself. Now she was an outsider, for her child's heart and life alike had passed from her keeping: It is a bitter moment for all mothers; doubly bitter when, as to Mrs Ramsden, the supplanter seems unworthy of his trust.

"Happiness is not everything, Elma! I hope,—I hope I am strong enough to endure even to see you suffer for your ultimate good."

She mopped her eyes with her handkerchief, while Elma turned aside, realising sadly that it was useless to prolong the discussion. Presently Geoffrey and his mother would arrive and then they would all consult together. Elma had not rehearsed her own share in the conversation; the all-important decision was in the last issue to be left to herself, and she had spoken the simple truth in saying that she wished above all things to do what was right. Her life's training had instilled the conviction that no happiness was possible at the cost of a sacrifice of principle. If she could be once convinced that it was wrong to marry Geoffrey Greville, she would give him up as unflinchingly as any martyr of old walked to the stake, but she must be convinced on the ground of principle alone! Pride, prejudice, convention, would pass her by, leaving her unshaken in her determination to marry the man she loved.

At four o'clock the great landau from the Manor drove up to the gate, and from within the shrouded windows mother and daughter watched the groom jump lightly from his seat, to shield the grey froth of Madame's draperies as she stepped to the ground. To Mrs Ramsden the scene was an eloquent illustration of the world, the flesh and the devil; the world exemplified by the carriage with its handsome trappings, its valuable horses, and liveried attendants; the flesh by Madame—a picture of elegance in cloudy grey draperies, her silvery locks surmounted by a flower-wreathed toque, her cheeks faintly pink beneath the old lace veil—the devil!—it was a hard word to apply to the handsome, resolute young fellow who followed his mother up the gravel path, but at the moment Geoffrey Greville appeared in Mrs Ramsden's eyes as the destroyer of her happiness, the serpent who had brought discord into Eden! She was in

truth an honest little Puritan in whose sight the good things of the world were but as snares and pitfalls. So far from feeling any pleasure in the thought that her daughter might one day reign as the great lady of the neighbourhood, the prospect filled her with unaffected dread, and the needle's eye had been quoted almost as frequently as the serpent's teeth, during the last week. She turned away from the window with a shudder of distress.

The door opened, and Madame entered, bringing with her that faint, delicious fragrance of violets which seemed inseparable from her person. Contrary to her hostess's expectation, she was wreathed in smiles, and even more gracious than of yore. She pressed the plump little hand extended towards her, kissed Elma on the cheek, exclaimed prettily upon the comfort of the chair to which she was escorted, and chatted about the weather as if her coming were an ordinary society call. Mrs Ramsden, being unaccustomed to the ways of fashionable warfare, was flurried and thrown off her balance by so unexpected an opening to the fray, and had hard work to answer connectedly. She was, moreover, keenly on the alert to watch the meeting between Elma and Geoffrey, whom she had not seen in each other's company since the fatal visit to the Manor. They shook hands without speaking a word, but their eyes met, and at the sight of that look, the onlooker thrilled with a memory of long ago. That glance, that silent hand-grasp softened her heart more than a hundred arguments. It was an ocular demonstration of what had until now been merely words!

The trim maid brought in the tea-tray and proceeded to set it out on the little table in front of her mistress. It was a good hour earlier than the time when the meal was served at the Manor, but the little business of handing round cups and cake broke the embarrassment of the first few minutes, and was therefore welcome to all. Elma began as usual to wait upon her guests, but Geoffrey took the plates out of her hand with an air of gentle authority, which the elder ladies were quick to note. It was the air of the master, the proprietor; as significant in its way as was Elma's blushing obedience. Once again Mrs Ramsden felt a pang of remembrance, but Madame arched her eyebrows, and tapped her foot on the floor in noiseless irritation. It was time that this nonsense came to an end!

"Well, dear people," she began airily, "let us get to business! It's so much wiser to talk things over quietly, when there is any misunderstanding. I thought it was so clever of Geoffrey to suggest this meeting. Letters are quite useless. One always forgets the most important things, or, if one remembers, they look so horribly disagreeable in black and white, and people bring them up against one years afterwards. Dear Elma, I'm afraid you think me a cruel old woman! I am desolated to appear so unfeeling, especially as I should certainly have fallen in love with you in Geoffrey's place, but it's not always a question of doing what we like in this world. I am sure your dear mother has taught you that. I said to Geoffrey: 'Elma has such sweet, true feelings, I shall be quite satisfied to trust to her decision when the matter has been put fully before her!'"

"Thank you," said Elma, faintly. She had put down her cup, and now sat with her fingers clasped tightly together on her lap. The two elder ladies faced her from the opposite side of the room; Geoffrey fidgeted about, and finally seated himself—not by her side, as had obviously been his first impulse—but some little distance away, where he could watch the expression of her face. Mrs Ramsden pushed the tea-table aside, and fidgeted with the jet trimming on her cuff.

"I—er, I think we should get on better if Mr Greville would—would kindly leave us alone!" she said awkwardly. "We are well acquainted with his arguments, and as Elma is to decide, there seems no object in his staying on. Elma will, no doubt, feel quieter and less restrained without his presence."

Madame's murmur of agreement was interrupted by a sharp exclamation from her son. He looked flushed and angry, but Elma checked him in his turn, and answered herself, in clear, decided accents! "No, mother! I shall feel much better if Geoffrey is here. I don't want him to go. If I am persuaded to give him up, it is only right that he should know my reasons. He will promise to listen quietly to what you have to say, as I am going to do, and not to interrupt until you have done." She turned towards her lover with a flickering smile. "Won't you, Geoffrey?"

Geoffrey bit his moustache, and scowled heavily.

"I'll—do my best!" he said slowly. "I'm not going away in any case. It's preposterous to suppose that I could be absent while such a discussion was going on. Elma knows that this is a matter of life and death to me. If you persuade her to give me up, it will be sending me straight to the devil!"

Mrs Ramsden's eyes flashed with anger.

"If an earthly love is the only incentive you have to follow the paths of righteousness, Mr Greville, that is a poor inducement to me to give my child into your care! I have brought her up to put principle first of all. It is my chief objection to yourself that your character is not worthy of the trust!"

"My dear lady, he is not a pickpocket! You speak as if he were a hardened criminal," cried Madame, with an irritated laugh. "Geoffrey may not be a saint, but I assure you that, considered as a young man of the world, he is quite a model specimen! He has been an excellent son. There have been no debts; no troubles of any kind. Absolutely, at times I have accused him of being almost too staid. ... One can only be young once!..."

"I think you and Mrs Ramsden have somewhat different standards, mother," put in Geoffrey quietly. He turned towards the last-mentioned lady, bending forward and speaking with deliberate emphasis. "I quite agree with you, Mrs Ramsden, that I am unworthy of your daughter. I wish I had been a better man for her sake. With her to help me I hope I might become a man more after your own heart. As my mother says, I have so far been a respectable member of society, for the things which you condemn in me are after all matters of opinion, but at this moment I stand at the parting of the ways. If you give me Elma, I shall look upon her as a sacred trust, and shall be a better man for her sake. I *must* be a better man with her beside me! ... If you refuse; if she refuses"—he shrugged expressively—"you empty my life of all I value. The responsibility will be upon your shoulders!"

"That is not true! You can depute to nobody the responsibility of your own soul," Mrs Ramsden began solemnly, but

Madame interrupted with an impatient gesture.

"I thought Geoffrey was not to interfere! For pity's sake don't let us waste time talking sentiment! We are here to discuss this matter in a sensible, business manner. Let us begin at once, and not waste time!"

To her surprise Elma met her glance with a smile. A happy, composed little smile, which brought the dimples into her soft cheeks. Really the child was wonderful! Her quietness and self-possession were in delightful contrast with her mother's flustered solemnity. Madame returned the smile, with restored equanimity, and felt a thrill of artistic satisfaction.

"I am afraid Geoffrey and I hardly look at our engagement from a business point of view!" said Elma, slowly. "It *is* a matter of sentiment with us, and we are not a bit ashamed of it, but I must answer mother first. ... Mother, dear, you are shocked because Geoffrey says he would not be good without me, but when *you* were young, when you were careless, and enjoyed things which you disapprove of now, was there no good influence in your life which helped you to be strong? It may have been a companion, or a book, or a sermon—one of a hundred things—but when it came, weren't you thankful for it? Didn't you hold close to it and fear lest it should go? I am Geoffrey's influence! I'm glad and proud that it is so. If I can help him in one little way, I'd rather do it than anything else in all the world! When he feels like that about me, I should think it very, very wrong to give him up."

"Elma, my dear, these are specious arguments! You are deceiving yourself, and preparing a bitter awakening! Mr Greville does not even understand what he is promising. His ideas and yours are different as night from day; the same words convey different meanings to you and him. You would find as you talked together that there was a gulf between you on every serious subject."

"No, mother, dear, there is no gulf. We agree—we always agree! I am amazed to find how marvellously we agree," said Elma, simply. Geoffrey's eyes flashed a look at her; a look of adoring triumph. Madame screwed her lips on one side, and stared markedly at a corner of the ceiling. Mrs Ramsden wrung her hands in despair.

"Elma, you pray every night to be delivered from temptation—consider what your position would be if you married Mr Greville! Ask yourself if you are strong enough to resist pride and selfishness, and absorption in the things of this world. Many would say that it was a great match for you, but I would rather see you settled in a cottage with enough money for your daily needs. It is easier for a camel—"

Elma interrupted quickly.

"I don't think you need be afraid, mother. I love beautiful things, but truly and honestly I believe they are good for me! It is a little difficult to explain, but ugly things—inartistic things, *jar!* They make me feel cross and discontented, while beauty is a joy! I need not become proud and self-engrossed because the things around me are beautiful and rich with associations. On the contrary, they ought to do me good. I'd *love* them so, and be so thankful, that I should want other people to enjoy them, too. It isn't riches themselves that one cares for—it is the things that riches can give!"

Madame had been watching the girl's face as she spoke, her own expression kindling in sympathy with views so entirely in accordance with her own, but at the last sentence her brows knitted.

"It's not a case of riches, my dear!" she said quickly. "I don't think you understand the position. Geoffrey is a poor man. The estate brings in little more than half what it did in his father's time, and the expense of keeping it up increases rather than diminishes, as the buildings grow older. He ought to marry money. All these years we have lived in the expectation of a marriage which would pay up old scores, and put things on a better basis for the future. If he marries a girl without money he will have to face constant anxiety and trouble."

Elma turned to her mother, her delicate brow puckered in anxiety.

"I shall have *some* money, shan't I, mother? You told me that father left some provision for me on my marriage!"

"You are to have three thousand pounds paid down if you marry with my consent. My income is largely derived from an annuity, Mrs Greville, but there will be about another five thousand to come to Elma after death."

Madame bowed her head in gracious patronage.

"Very nice, I'm sure! A very nice little sum for pin money, but quite useless for our purposes. Don't hate me, Elma—I am the most unmercenary of women—Geoffrey will tell you that I am always getting into debt!—but when a man is the owner of a property—which has descended to him from generations of ancestors, his first duty is to it. *Noblesse oblige!* It is not right to allow it to fall into disrepair for a matter of sentiment!"

Elma sat with downcast looks considering the point, while Geoffrey devoured her face with hungry eyes. Mrs Ramsden's face had flushed to a painful red, and she passed her handkerchief nervously round her lips. She could bear to torture her child herself, but not to sit by and hear another woman follow in her own footsteps.

The silence lasted for a long minute before Elma replied by asking a question on her own behalf.

"Can it be right for a man to marry one woman for money, when he has given his heart to another?"

Mrs Greville tossed her head with another impatient little laugh.

"His heart! Ah, my dear, a man's heart is an adaptable commodity! He 'gives it,' as you say, many times over in the course of his life. He is far more likely to love a wife whose money brings him ease and comfort, than one for whose pretty face he has sacrificed his peace!"

Elma turned to her lover and looked deep into his eyes. With a strong effort he had resisted breaking into the conversation before now, but his face was more eloquent than words. She smiled at him, a tender little smile of encouragement.

"I am very economical. I would help Geoffrey to save. I have not been accustomed to luxuries, so it would cost me nothing to do without them, and he says he doesn't care. Don't think I am selfish, Mrs Greville, please! I am thinking of Geoffrey first, but I believe he would be happier living quietly with me, and looking after the estate himself, instead of paying an agent to do it, than if he sold himself for money and ease. We love each other very much. We need nothing more than just to be together."

Geoffrey turned aside and stared out of the window. The two mothers exchanged helpless glances.

"Elma!" said Mrs Ramsden, sharply, "have you no pride? It is hard enough for me to sit by and listen. Are you not ashamed to force yourself upon a family where you are not wanted? When I have looked forward to your marriage, I have always imagined that you would be welcomed with open arms. For your own position you are well dowered. I have been proud of you all your life—too proud, perhaps—it would be a bitter blow to me to see you married on sufferance. If you have no other feeling in the matter, does not your pride come to your aid?"

"Mother, I'm going to marry Geoffrey, not his family! He can take care of his wife!"

"The child is right!" said Madame, quickly. "Geoffrey's wife, whoever she may be, will be treated with every respect. It is not the judgment of others which she need dread, but the judgment of her own heart. Listen to me, child! You are a sweet thing, and I love you for your devotion to my boy. As I told you before, I should be in love with you in his place, but I'm an old woman, and I know the world! Geoffrey is not used to work and economy; for a little time, while the first glamour lasted, he might be contented enough, but he would weary in the end. He would surely weary, and then—how would you feel? When you saw him restless and discontented; longing to leave you and fly back to his old life, would you feel no remorse? Love's young dream does not last for ever, my pretty child."

"No," said Elma, quietly; "dreams don't last, but sometimes the awakening is better! You have known Geoffrey all his life, Mrs Greville, and it seems presumptuous to pretend that I know him even better, but I can—*fee!* You believe he would tire of me, and long to get back to his old luxurious life. You think he would love me very much for a little time and then be indifferent and careless, and that I should feel it was my own fault; but you are wrong. Indeed, indeed, you are wrong! He is your son—has he ever failed you? You say yourself that he has been good and true. You would trust him for your own future. Do you think he would be less loyal to his own wife? I am not at all afraid. I am like you—I trust Geoffrey!"

As she finished speaking she turned towards her lover and held out her hand towards him, and in two strides Geoffrey was by her side; was on his knees beside her, holding that little hand pressed between both his own, turning to look at his mother with triumphant eyes; with eyes ashine with something deeper than triumph.

Geoffrey on his knees! Tears in Geoffrey's eyes! Madame stared in amaze, then broke into a sudden excited laugh.

"Bravo, Elma! Bravo, Geoffrey! Congratulations, my dears. Thank heaven you have a mother who knows when she is well beaten!"

She rose from her seat and crossed the room to where the girl sat. "Bravo, little Elma! I like to see a good fighting spirit. You will make Geoffrey a charming wife, and I shall be proud of my daughter." She took Elma's disengaged hand and pressed it between her own, and the girl smiled a happy response, but Geoffrey was oblivious of her presence, his eyes fixed upon his love's face, with the rapt, adoring gaze with which a knight of old may have gazed upon the vision of the grail. His mother looked at him, and her lips quivered. Artificial and frivolous though she was, her only son was dear to her heart. Since the hour of his birth he had been to her as a pivot round which the world revolved. Her son—the last of the Grevilles who had owned the Manor since the days of the Tudors. To be alienated from him would be the bitterest grief which life could bring.

Her grip tightened on the girl's hand.

"Elma!" she cried urgently. "I am Geoffrey's mother. He is yours now, and will be swayed by you, but he has been mine for thirty-three years. If I have taken part against you, it has been because I believed it was best for him. I have lost, and you have won. You will be his wife, the mistress of the Manor. I don't grudge you your success, but don't—don't bear me a grudge! Don't turn my boy against me!"

"Mrs Greville!" gasped Elma, breathlessly. "Mrs Greville!" She pulled her hand from Geoffrey's grasp, and rose swiftly to her feet. "Oh, please don't think that I could be so mean! I want him to love you more, not less. I want to be a *real* daughter! You must not think that I am going to drive you from your place. You must stay on at the Manor, and let me learn from you. There is so much that I shall have to learn. I shall be quite satisfied to be allowed to help!"

"Silly child!" said Madame, smiling. She lifted her delicate, ringed hand and stroked the girl's cheeks with kindly patronage. "You don't know what you are talking about, my dear, but I *do*—fortunately for us all! Geoffrey's wife must have no divided rule. You need not trouble your pretty head about me. Norton palls at times even to a Greville, and I shall enjoy my liberty. I'll go out and spend a cold weather with Carol; I'll have a cosy little flat in town, and do the theatres. I'll enjoy myself gadding about, and come down upon you now and then when I want a rest, but I'll never *live* with you, my dear; be sure of that!"

"It's rather early to make plans, mater. Things will arrange themselves. Elma and I will always try to make you happy," said Geoffrey, bluntly.

He, too, had risen, and stood by his mother's side; flushed, triumphant, a little shamefaced at the remembrance of

his late emotion; but transparently and most radiantly happy. "I'll do all in my power to be a good son to you, and to Mrs Ramsden also if she will allow me!"

He was the first of the three to remember the existence of the little woman in the background; the little woman who was sobbing into her handkerchief, shedding bitter tears because, forsooth, her daughter had secured the biggest match in the country-side, and was about to become a Greville of Norton Manor!

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

The parental summons arrived ten days after the date of Elma's formal engagement, and at the expiration of the seventh week of Cornelia's sojourn in England. There it was for all the world to see;—short, authoritative, and to the point. Circumstances had altered Poppar's plan. His visit to Europe must be postponed, he desired his daughter to return home by the first possible boat. Useless to exclaim, to argue, to condemn. The command had gone forth; implicit obedience must ensue.

"Will you feel badly when I'm gone, Aunt Soph?" Cornelia asked after the news had been broken. She looked wistfully into the spinster's face, and felt herself answered as she noted the involuntary momentary hesitation which preceded the reply.

"It will naturally be a disappointment to me to miss seeing my brother, but I hope the pleasure is only deferred. I am glad to have had an opportunity of making your acquaintance, my dear, though the time is so curtailed."

"Yes, I guess we've fixed-up an acquaintance right enough!" said Cornelia, quietly. Seven weeks, or seven years—what did it matter? She and this woman could never become friends. Time counts for nothing in the intercourse of souls. An hour may reveal a kindred spirit; no years can bridge some gaps. Elma would remain a life-long friend, Guest a life-long memory, but her kinswoman, the nearest on earth with the one exception of her father, must forever be a stranger.

Cornelia was sad at heart that day, and Elma was sad, too; opening wide, startled eyes, and clasping her friend in jealous arms.

"Cornelia, it isn't true! It *can't* be true! I can't spare you, dear. Is it really impossible to stay on a little longer? Geoffrey and I counted on you for our wedding. It is fixed for October, and I wanted you for a bridesmaid. I wanted you to pay me a visit in my own house! You have been such a friend to us both, that we *need* you, Cornelia! I shall miss you badly!"

"Shucks!" returned Cornelia, lightly. "You'll forget there is such a creature in existence. *I* should, in your place, and I don't mind if you do, for I know you'll remember again another day. This is Geoffrey's hour, and I won't interfere. If I live, I'll pay you that visit right enough, and maybe you'll come over to see me. I'd give you a roaring time. Tell Geoffrey he is bound to bring you over to see America. I'll think about you on your marriage-day, but I don't know as I'm sorry to do the thinking at a distance. Wedding-days aren't the liveliest occasions in the world for the looker-on. I guess I'd feel pretty '*left*,' when you drove off from the gates, and I found myself all by my lonesome with the two old girls. ... I've wired to Liverpool about berths, and may have to start off at a day's notice, so we've got to make the most of the time. Aunt Soph don't care! She's polite, of course, but right at the back of her mind I can see she's planning to clean out my room, and thinking how good it will be to have the mats laid aside, and the shroudings over the tables! If it wasn't for you, Moss Rose, I should feel I'd done a fool-trick coming over at all! When all's said and done it amounts to nothing but disappointment and heart-break."

"You mean," began Elma, "you mean—" and then suddenly paused. Why should Cornelia's heart break? Disappointment and disillusion would be natural enough in one who had experienced both coldness and deception within the last few weeks, but heart-break was too strong a term. To Elma, with her mind full to overflowing of that beloved Geoffrey, it seemed as if nothing but love could count so seriously in life. Her thoughts flew to Guest, recalling all she had heard of his knight-errantry in London; of the long hours which the two had spent alone together; and later on, of the daily meetings in the Park, planned for her own benefit, but none the less opportunities for fuller knowledge. She fixed her blue eyes on Cornelia's face, and asked a sudden question—

"Does Captain Guest know that you are going?"

"How should he?" returned Cornelia, lightly. Eyes and lips were unflinching, but all the will in the world could not keep the blood from her cheeks. "He's visiting somewhere at the other end of the country, with old friends who belong to his own world, and feel the same way about the same things. Let him stay and be happy! I don't want him to come worrying down here for the fun of saying good-bye. Guess he's had trouble enough about my affairs. Mind now, Elma, you are not to tell him! This is my affair, and I won't have you interfere."

Elma meekly disavowed any intention of communicating with Captain Guest, but like many other meek people she harboured a quiet reservation which annulled the promise. She would not write, but—Geoffrey could! Geoffrey *should*! That flame in Cornelia's cheek satisfied her that the girl's interest was deeper than she would admit, and if Guest returned the feeling, what joy, what rapture to have Cornelia settled in England; to look forward to a life of constant intercourse! Cornelia had helped her; according to her lights Elma was determined to help Cornelia also.

With disconcerting swiftness a return telegram arrived from Liverpool stating that owing to illness a passenger had been suddenly obliged to resign a state-room on the boat sailing on the following Saturday, and that the accommodation would be reserved pending Miss Briskett's confirmation. An immediate reply was requested.

Cornelia gasped and hesitated. Four days! *Only* four days, and then farewell to England and English friends. She had not expected anything so speedy as this. During these summer months berths were engaged so long ahead that it



was generally a most difficult thing to arrange for a speedy passage. She had been told of this over and over again; had known of her friends' difficulties in such matters; in the background of her mind had counted on a similar delay in her own case. In a week or a fortnight much might happen, but in four days! She stood battling with temptation, while Mary watched her with anxious eyes. No one but herself knew the purport of the message; no one need know if the answer were a refusal. Two or three scribbled words would give her a reprieve. ... Poor Cornelia! She realised afresh how easy it was to be brave in anticipation, how bitterly hard in actual fact. She was silent so long that Mary summoned up courage to ask a question—

"Is it bad news, miss?"

Cornelia stared at her blankly for a moment, and valiantly forced a smile.

"I guess there's two sides to it, as there are to most things in this world. My Poppar'll think it splendid, but you'll hate it badly enough. I'm going pretty quick, Mury! You won't have me but four days more!"

The truth was out. She had burned her boats, and made retreat impossible. While Mary wept and lamented, Cornelia wrote the confirmatory wire, and sent it out to the waiting messenger. Then Mary returned to continue her lamentations.

"I wish I could marry him, and be done with it! I can't seem to face staying on here with no one but her in the house, nagging at us all the day. I'll have to make another move!" she proclaimed dismally. In Mary's converse the singular pronoun, when masculine, always applied to her friend; when feminine, to her mistress. Cornelia had grasped this fact, and had therefore no difficulty in understanding her meaning. She sat down in a chair by the window, and stared at the maid with serious eyes.

"Do you love him, Mury? Enough to marry him, and live beside him every one day to the end of your life? You think you would not get—*tired*?"

Mary hesitated, unwilling to commit herself. "I wouldn't like to go so far as that," she announced judicially. "He aggravates me at times something cruel, but I'd sooner be aggravated by him nor anyone else. They talk a lot of rubbish about love, Miss Cornelia, but that's about the size of it when all's said and done. Some people suit you and others don't, and all the lovey-doveying in the world won't make 'em—"

"Why, Mury, you are a philosopher! It's the dead truth, Mury, but I guess you needn't rub it in.—If you've made up your mind, why need you wait?"

"Furniture, miss! I've told him I won't marry to go into rooms, not if it's ever so. I'll wait till I get a 'ome of me own. He'd put by a goodish bit, and so had I, but things have been agen us. He was out of work four months last winter, and mother's legs are a awful drain—liniments, and bandages, and what-not. You can't see your own mother suffer, and not pay out. We've got to wait till we save up again."

"How much money does it take to furnish a cottage over here, Mury?"

"That depends on how it's done. You can do it 'an'some for forty pounds. I lived with a girl who did hers for twenty, but I wouldn't like to be as close as that. I reckon about thirty."

"Thirty pounds! One hundred and fifty dollars!" Cornelia gasped in astonishment at the smallness of the sum. "You can't mean that that includes everything—chairs and tables, and carpets, and dishes, and beds, and bureaus, and brooms, and tins, and curtains, and fire-irons—and all the fixing to put 'em up! It isn't possible you can get them all for a hundred and fifty dollars!"

"You can, miss. There's a shop in the Fore Street where they do you everything complete for three rooms for thirty pounds, with a velvet suite for the parlour. Lady's chair, gent's chair, sofa, and four uprights, with chiffonier, and overmantel, and all. You couldn't wish for anything better. The girl I lived with had only a few odd bits—I'd be ashamed to have such a poor sort of parlour.—In the kitchen they give you a dresser, and a flap-table, and linoleum on the floor. Jim and me went to the shop one day to have a look round. ... That was when he had a bit put by!" Mary sighed, and flicked away a tear. "And now you're going next! I'm getting a bit sick of bad luck, I am!"

Cornelia was bending forward in her seat, her chin supported in the palms of her hands. Her expression was very grave and wistful, but in her eyes shone the light of awakened interest.

"Mury!—you've been real good and attentive to me. I guess I've given you quite a heap of trouble. I want to make you a present before I go. Would you like it if I fixed-up that house so's you could get married right away? If you say so, you can go to that store and make your own bargains, and I'll leave thirty pounds with Miss Ramsden to pay the bills. I'd like to feel I'd helped you to a home of your own, Mury!"

Mary clutched the back of a chair near to which she was standing; her eyes protruded, her chin dropped, speech failed her in the excess of emotion. She could only stare, and gasp, and stare again.

"Poor Mury!" said Cornelia, softly. "Are you so pleased? I want you should be pleased. If I ken make someone happy to-day—right-down, tearing happy, it's going to help me more'n you know. ... Won't you enjoy going shopping with your friend, Mury, bossing round in that store, choosing the things you want, and putting on airs as if you owned the bank? Mind you put on airs, Mury! Make 'em hop round, and get things to your taste. They'll think the more of you, and it's not every day one furnishes a house. ... I'll send you my picture to stand on the mantelpiece in that parlour, and when you dust it in the mornings, you can send me a kind thought 'way over all those miles of ocean, and I'll think of you sitting in the lady's chair. ... For the land's sake, girl, don't have a fit! You don't need to have a thing unless you say so!"

"Oh, Miss Cornelia!" sobbed Mary, brokenly. "You're too—I'm so—you're an *angel*, Miss Cornelia, that's what you are! ... Jim will go off his head when he hears this.—It's a sort of thing you can't seem to believe.—I loved to wait on you, miss; if you'd never given me a thing I'd have loved it all the same—you talked so kind, and took such an interest, and was always so lively and laughing. It wasn't for what I could get—but the house! ... To have a house thrown at you, as you may say, at a moment's notice—it—takes away my breath! I can't seem to take it in."

"But you are happy, Mury? You feel happy to think of it?"

"I should think I do just. Clean dazed with happiness!"

"Poor Mury!" said Cornelia, again. She looked across the room at the flushed, ecstatic face of the prospective bride, and smiled with tender sympathy.

"I'm real glad you're pleased. To-night, just as soon as dinner's over, you must go out and tell your friend. I'll fix it up with Aunt Soph. You'll have a fine time, won't you? He won't believe it's true, but you'll *make* him believe, and be as happy as grigs walking round and planning out that parlour. Come into my room when you get back and tell me what he says. I shan't be asleep!"

There seemed no time for sleep during the next few days. The mornings were devoted to packing, and to long confidential interviews with Elma; the afternoons to a succession of tea-parties, to which every old lady in Norton was bidden in turns, to say the same things, and breathe the same pious good wishes; the evenings to decorous cribbage matches with her aunt; the nights—the nights were Cornelia's own secret, but they left a wan, heavy-eyed damsel to yawn at the breakfast-table each morning.

When the last hour arrived, the very last, Cornelia's friends assembled at the station to bid her good-bye; Miss Briskett, tall and angular in her new grey costume; Mrs Ramsden with the black feather fiercely erect in the front of her bonnet; lovely, blooming Elma attended by her swain, and in the background the faithful Mary, holding on to the dressing-bag, and sniffing dolorously. Cornelia had refused to be escorted farther on the journey, and now that the hour had arrived, her one longing was to say her farewells and be left to herself.

She was eager to be off, yet, when the train steamed slowly out of the station, she was gripped by a strange, swift spasm of anguish. Not on her friends' behalf. Aunt Soph had made no pretence of anything beyond polite regret. Elma and Mary shared a personal happiness so deep, that, for the time at least, the departure of a friend held no lasting sting. Cornelia could wave adieu to each, rejoicing in their joy, in the remembrance that she had had some small share in bringing it about; yet the torturing pain continued, the desolating ache of disappointment.

What was it for which she had waited? What hope had lived persistent at the back of her mind, while she had pretended that she had no hope? She knew now that, hour by hour, she had lived in the expectation of Guest's return; had felt an unreassuring conviction that he must come before she left! That she had done her utmost to prevent his coming had nothing to do with the case. Surely, when she had so sternly followed the dictates of reason, there was all the more need for some good fairy to weave a miracle which should upset her plans. Something must happen! Something! At sweet-and-twenty it is so difficult to believe in the irrevocable!

The journey to London was alive with memories. In this corner she had sat watching Guest's face, listening to his voice as he told the story of his life. At this landscape they had looked together, admiring, and comparing tastes and impressions. At Paddington, Mrs Moffatt had stood in waiting upon the platform. Cornelia was thankful to be safe inside the boat-mail, away from the pressing memories. Here the atmosphere was of home. Eye and ear caught on every side the familiar accent, the familiar phraseology; the familiar tilt of the hat, and squaring of shoulder. The passenger list included more than one well-known name, and once afloat she was sure of companionship. She settled down in her corner, with a sigh of relief, as of one who has reached a haven after struggling in deep waters. This was a foretaste of home! These people were her own kindred; their ways were her ways, their thoughts her thoughts. For the first time since her arrival on English soil she felt the rest of being in perfect accord with her surroundings. With Cornelia America was a passion; life away from her native land was only half a life.

Aboard the great steamer the passengers were rushing to and fro, searching for their state-rooms, and, when found, depositing their impedimenta on the tops of the narrow white bunks.

Cornelia walked to the quietest corner of the deck, dropped her bag on a seat, and leant idly over the rail. She was in no hurry to go below, and held instinctively aloof from the groups of fellow-passengers and their friends. She was alone, and her heart was sad.

Someone walking quickly along the deck caught sight of the solitary figure in the trim, dark-blue dress, and recognised its outline before a turn of the head revealed the glorious, flaming hair. Someone with a grim face, pale beneath his tan, with haggard lines about the eyes and mouth; a man whose looks betrayed the fact that he had been awake all night, face to face with calamity. He walked straight to the girl's side, and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Cornelia!"

Cornelia turned swiftly, and a light leapt into her eyes; a light of joy, so pure and involuntary that, at sight of it, the man's face lost something of its grim tension. He turned his back so as to screen the girl from the passers-by, and his hand tightened on her arm.

"Cornelia, are you running away from me?"

She did not answer, but her silence gave assent—her silence, and a quiet bend of the head.

"Why?"

"I was—afraid!" breathed Cornelia, low.

Beneath the close-fitting cap Guest could see her lips tremble. The little face looked white and tense. She twisted her fingers nervously.

"Afraid of me, and my love? Afraid that I should come back to trouble you? Afraid of my selfishness, Cornelia?"

The curling lips breathed a faint dissent.

"Of what, then? We have only a few minutes left. You must tell me the truth now!"

She raised her eyes to his; brave, pitiful eyes, mutely imploring for mercy.

"Of myself! Of my own weakness! Afraid lest I might give way, and ruin two lives!"

"You knew that I loved you; that I had gone away to prove my love, to see if it would stand the test of absence? It was a serious matter for us both, and I would not let myself act on the spur of an impulse. If I had, Cornelia, you know that I should have spoken long ago!—that night on the river. You knew it at the time. I saw it in your eyes.—I made you promise to let me know if you left Norton during my absence. It was not fair to run away."

"I never promised! I never did! You asked me, but I didn't promise. I felt at the time that I must leave."

The words came in quick, gasping breaths, as a child might speak who tried to justify himself to his taskmaster. Guest's face softened at the sound, and his grasp of the girl's arm turned into a caress.

"Darling, don't you see what that means? You love me, or you would not be afraid. Geoffrey wrote to me giving me warning, but the letter only reached me late yesterday night. I have been travelling ever since. I just managed to be here in time. If I had missed the boat I should have come after you. Do you think a few thousand miles are going to keep us apart, Cornelia?"

She shook her head sadly. "No!—no distance in space, just the distance between our two selves; the distance that can't be bridged! We belong to different worlds, you and I; we could never be happy together. You love forms and ceremonies, and conventions; all the things that worry me most, and make me feel ugly. It's the height of your ambition to settle down in your old home, and to keep things rolling along in the same old ruts that they've run in for centuries. I want change and excitement, and the newest there is. Your quiet English life would get on my nerves. Poppa and I have had lots of ups and downs, and I've never lost grit. I ken bear a good big blow, but to stodge along every day the same dull round would drive me crazed! We live quickly over with us, and you're so slow. I don't say that the advantage is all on our side. I used to laugh at English girls, but I don't any longer, since I've known Elma Ramsden. If I were a man, Elma's the sort I'd want for my wife. You'll find another like her some day, and be thankful you are free. You love me now, but your love would not stand the strain of pulling separate ways all our lives—"

Guest gazed at her with gloomy eyes.

"You don't love me, or you would not think of anything else. Whatever may be the differences between us, you are the one woman I have ever wanted for my wife. I can't bear to let you go. ... Don't trifle with me for the few minutes that are left. Tell me honestly how we stand. ... Do you love me, Cornelia?"

"I—*could!*" answered Cornelia, slowly. Her cheeks flushed beneath his gaze, and the white lids drooped over the honest eyes. "It was just finding out how easy it would be, that sent me running home. The people at Norton think it was Poppa's doing, but I'll tell you straight that I asked him to send for me. ... Life's a big chance. We've got to make the best we know out of it, for ourselves and other people. I don't mean to spoil things for us both. ... You didn't *want* to love me! Right at the back of your mind you've felt all the time that I was not your mate. You went away to think it out; perhaps, if the truth's known, you were still undecided when the news of my sailing brought you up with a run. When I am gone and you have had time to cool down, you'll be glad!"

Guest repeated the word with bitter emphasis.

"*Glad!* I shall be glad, shall I? At the present moment, in any case, I am the most miserable man on earth. Have you no pity, Cornelia? Will nothing move you? Think how happy we have been together! If we loved each other, surely we could outlive the differences? Can you bear to go away like this and leave me for ever? Is it nothing to you how I suffer? Don't you *care*, Cornelia?"

"Yes, I care," she answered simply. "It *hurts*, but it's going to hurt a lot more if I stay behind. If we lived together it would be like trying to piece together the bits of two different puzzles. We don't fit!"

The simple words expressed the truth with paralysing force. Even at that bitter moment Guest recognised their truth, and was dumb before it. He turned aside, his strong jaw working with emotion, powerless to fight any longer against the rock of Cornelia's will.

Behind him lay the grey city wrapped in its veil of smoke, the tall spire of the old church rising in picturesque isolation above the line of the surrounding buildings. It seemed at that moment to stand as a symbol of the life of the Mother Country, a life fenced in by convention, by forms and ceremonies sanctified to every Englishman by centuries of association; forms at which he may at times smile or scoff, but which he would no sooner demolish than he would tear away the clustering ivy which clothes his walls. Before him lay the broad river, its mouth widening to the sea: to that free, untrammelled waste of waters, which were a fit symbol of that land of the West, whose daughter could place her liberty even before her love!

There came a sudden stir and movement. A second time the bell clanged its warning, and the visitors began to

stream towards the gangway. Guest heard the sound of a strangled sob, and felt his own heart beat with suffocating quickness.

"I—I can't face it," he cried desperately, "I won't take this as an answer. If I had time I could *make* you listen to me. I could make you agree. I shall come after you to New York."

She turned aside, but not so quickly that he did not catch the sudden light in her eyes, the same involuntary gleam of joy which had greeted his coming a few minutes before. The sight of that tell-tale signal made his heart leap, but Cornelia shook her head, and her voice broke in a low-breathed "Ho! It would be a mistake. Wait here. Wait quietly! At first it will hurt, but after a while you'll be glad. You'll find that other things come first. You think now that you will come after me, but I know you better! You will never come. You'll not want me any more."

Guest laughed a strained little laugh of excitement and exultation. Cornelia might preach prudence, and hold fast to her own ideas, but at least she had not forbidden his coming; had not said in so many words, "I will not see you!" For the moment, at least, he had triumphed; he was confident that the future also would be his own.

"We will discuss that question on our next meeting," he cried breathlessly. "I will wait as long as you like; undergo any test you like to decree, but I will come! *Au revoir*, Cornelia!"

"Good-bye!" breathed Cornelia, low. She raised her eyes to his, but now there was no light in the golden depths, but only a deep and immeasurable sadness.

Guest wrung her hand, and turned aside. There was no time left to reason further. The future alone could prove the depth and stability of his love. He made his way to the gangway, his heart wrung with the sense of loss, of wounded love and pride. By his side men and women sobbed and cried, while others laughed and exchanged merry banter with their friends on board. To some this meant a parting for life; to others a pleasure excursion across the ocean ferry. Among them all, was there one whose loss was as his own?

A wild impulse seized him to push his way back and remain on the boat for the first stage of the journey, but the steady stream bore him onward, and, as in a dream, he found himself standing on the stage, and saw the gangway descend. He stood in the crowd and heard a woman sob by his side. She was waving her handkerchief to a sad-faced man, who stood on the spot which Cornelia had vacated but a minute before. Now she had disappeared. Guest's eyes searched for her hungrily, but in vain. It was only as the vessel slowly moved from the stage that she came into sight; a small dark figure standing alone on the upper deck, with the sunlight shining on ruddy locks, and on a white face turned outwards towards the sea.

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