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# POTTS'S PAINLESS CURE

By Edward Bellamy

1898

"Must you go up to that tiresome old college again to-night?"

Pouting lips and delicate brows fretted in pretty importunity over the troubled eyes enforced the pleading tones, and yet the young man to whom they were addressed found strength to reply:—

"I 'm afraid I can't get rid of it. I particularly promised Sturgis I would look in on him, and it won't do for me to cut my acquaintance with the class entirely just because I 'm having such a jolly time down here."

"Oh, no, you don't think it jolly at all, or you would n't be so eager to go away. I 'm sure I must be very dull company."

The hurt tone and pretended pique with which she said this were assuredly all that was needed to make the *petite* teaser irresistible. But the young man replied, regarding her the while with an admiration in which there was a singular expression of uneasiness:—

"Can't, Annie, 'pon honor. I 'm engaged, and you know—

*"'I could not love thee, dear, so much,  
Loved I not honor more!'"*

And transferring her hand to his lips he loosed its soft, lingering clasp and was gone, stopping at the gate to throw back a kiss to her as she stood in the porch, by way of amends for his hasty parting.

"George Hunt, you 're an infernal scamp!"

These were the opprobrious words he muttered to himself as he passed out of earshot. The beneficent common law does not condemn a man merely on his own confession unless circumstances in evidence lend probability to his self-accusation. Before we coincide in Mr. Hunt's opinion of himself, let us therefore inquire into the circumstances.

He was in the last term of senior year at ——— college. For the past year he had been boarding at the Giffords', and Annie and he had fallen in love. The fall on his part had been quite voluntary and deliberate. He had fallen in love because it was the correct thing for a young collegian, engaged in the study of the humanities, to be in love, and made him feel more like a man than smoking, drinking, or even sporting a stove-pipe hat and cane. Vanity aside, it was very jolly to have a fine, nice girl who thought no end of a fellow, to walk, talk, and sing with, and to have in mind when one sang the college songs about love and wine with the fellows. And it gave him also a very agreeable sense of superior experience as he mingled in their discussions of women and the tender passion.

But withal he was a conscientious, kind-hearted young fellow enough, and had suffered occasional qualms of conscience when little words or incidents had impressed him with the knowledge that Annie's love for him was a more serious matter than his for her. He felt that by insisting on exchanging the pure gold of her

earnest affection for the pinchbeck of his passing fancy, she was making a rogue of him. He should be in no position to marry for years, nor did he want to; and if he had wanted to, though he felt terribly hard-hearted when he owned it to himself, his feeling toward Annie was not quite so deep as to be a real wish to marry her. As his last year in college approached its end, he had thought more and more of these things, and had returned from his last vacation determined to begin to draw gradually away from her, and without any shock to bring their relations back to the footing of friendship. The idea seemed a very plausible one, but it is scarcely necessary to state that, living in the same house, and frequently alone with her, it took about a week and a few dozen reproachful glances from grieving eyes to melt this artificial ice with a freshet of affection, and when, a couple of months later, he calmly reviewed the situation, he found himself involved perceptibly deeper than ever, on account of the attempt at extrication.

Only two or three weeks of the term remained, and it was too late to repeat the unsuccessful experiment. He had tried his best and failed, and nothing remained but to be as happy as possible with her in the short time left. Then she must get over her disappointment as other girls did in like cases. No doubt some woman would hurt his feelings some day, and so make it square. He took much satisfaction in this reflection. But such cynical philosophy did not lull his conscience, which alternately inspired his manner with an unwonted demonstrativeness and tenderness, and again made him so uncomfortable in her presence that he was fain to tear himself away and escape from her sight on any pretext. Her tender glances and confiding manner made him feel like a brute, and when he kissed her he felt that it was the kiss of a Judas. Such had been his feelings this evening, and such were the reflections tersely summed up in that ejaculation,—“George Hunt, you’re an infernal scamp!” On arriving at Sturgis’s room, he found it full of tobacco smoke, and the usual crowd there, who hailed him vociferously. For he was one of the most popular men in college, although for a year or so he had been living outside the buildings. Several bottles stood on the tables, but the fellows had as yet arrived only at the argumentative stage of exhilaration, and it so happened that the subject under discussion at once took Hunt’s close attention. Mathewson had been reading the first volume of Goethe’s autobiography, and was indulging in some strictures on his course in jilting Frederica and leaving the poor girl heartbroken.

“But, man,” said Sturgis, “he didn’t want to marry her, and seeing he didn’t, nothing could have been crueller to her, to say nothing of himself, than to have done so.”

“Well, then,” said Mathewson, “why did he go and get her in love with him?”

“Why, he took his risk and she hers, for the fun of the game. She happened to be the one who paid for it, but it might just as well have been he. Why, Mat, you must see yourself that for Goethe to have married then would have knocked his art-life into a cocked hat. Your artist has just two great foes,—laziness and matrimony. Each has slain its thousands. Hitch Pegasus to a family cart and he can’t go off the thoroughfare. He must stick to the ruts. I admit that a bad husband may be a great artist; but for a good husband, an uxorious, contented husband, there’s no chance at all.”

“You are neither of you right, as usual,” said little Potts, in his oracular way.

When Potts first came to college, the fellows used to make no end of fun of the air of superior and conclusive wisdom with which he assumed to lay down the law on every question, this being the more laughable because he was such a little chap. Potts did not pay the least attention to the jeers, and finally the jeerers were constrained to admit that if he did have an absurdly pretentious way of talking, his talk was unusually well worth listening to, and the result was that they took him at his own valuation, and, for the sake of hearing what he had to say, quietly submitted to his assumption of authority as court of appeal. So when he coolly declared both disputants wrong, they manifested no resentment, but only an interest as to what he was going to say, while the other fellows also looked up curiously.

“It would have been a big mistake for Goethe to have married her,” pursued Potts, in his deliberate monotone, “but he was n’t justified on that account in breaking her heart. It was his business, having got her in love with him, to get her out again and leave her where she was.”

“Get her out again?” demanded Mathewson. “How was he to do that?”

“Humph!” grunted Potts. “If you have n’t found it much easier to lose a friend than to win one, you’re luckier than most. If you asked me how he was to get her in love with him, I should have to scratch my head, but the other thing is as easy as unraveling a stocking.”

“Well, but, Potts,” inquired Sturgis, with interest, “how could Goethe have gone to work, for instance, to disgust Frederica with him?”

“Depends on the kind of girl. If she is one of your high-steppers as to dignity and sense of honor, let him play mean and seem to do a few dirty tricks. If she’s a stickler for manners and good taste, let him betray a few traits of boorishness or Philistinism; or if she has a keen sense of the ridiculous, let him make an ass of himself. I should say the last would be the surest cure and leave least of a sore place in her feelings, but it would be hardest on his vanity. Everybody knows that a man would rather seem a scamp than a fool.”

“I don’t believe there’s a man in the world who would play the voluntary fool to save any woman’s heart from breaking, though he might manage the scamp,” remarked Mathewson. “And anyhow, Potts, I believe there’s no girl who would n’t choose to be jilted outright, rather than be juggled out of her affections that way.”

“No doubt she would say so, if you asked her,” replied the imperturbable Potts. “A woman always prefers a nice sentimental sorrow to a fancy-free state. But it isn’t best for her, and looking out for her good, you must deprive her of it. Women are like children, you know, our natural wards.”

This last sentiment impressed these beardless youths as a clincher, and there was a pause. But Mathewson, who was rather strong on the moralities, rallied with the objection that Potts’s plan would be deceit.

“Well, now, that’s what I call cheeky,” replied its author, with a drawl of astonishment. “I suppose it wasn’t deceit when you were prancing around in your best clothes both literally and figuratively, trying to bring your good points into such absurd prominence as to delude her into the idea that you had no bad ones. Oh, no, it’s only deceit when you appear worse than you are, not when you try to appear better. Strikes me that when you’ve got a girl into a fix, it won’t do at that time of day to plead your conscience as a reason for not getting

her out of it. Seeing that a man is generally ready to sacrifice his character in reality to his own interests, he ought to be willing to sacrifice it in appearance to another's."

Mathewson was squelched, but Sturgis came to his relief with the suggestion:—

"Would n't a little genuine heartache, which I take it is healthy enough, if it is n't pleasant, be better for her than the cynical feeling, the disgust with human nature, which she would experience from finding her ideal of excellence a scamp or a fool?"

The others seemed somewhat impressed, but Potts merely ejaculated,—

"Bosh!" Allowing a brief pause for this ejaculation to do its work in demoralizing the opposition he proceeded. "Sturgis, you remember 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' and how Titania, on the application of Puck's clarifying lotion to her eyes, perceives that in Bottom she has loved an ass. Don't you suppose Titania suffered a good deal from the loss of her ideal?"

There was a general snicker at Sturgis's expense.

"Well, now," continued Potts gravely, "a woman who should fall in love with one of us fellows and deem him a hero would be substantially in Titania's plight when she adored Bottom, and about as much an object of pity when her hero disclosed an asininity which would be at least as near to being his real character as the heroism she ascribed to him."

"That 's all very well," said Merrill dryly, "but it strikes me that it's middling cheeky for you fellows to be discussing how you 'll jilt your sweethearts with least expense to their feelings, when the chances are that if you should ever get one, you 'll need all your wits to keep her from jilting you."

"You are, as usual, trivial and inconsequential this evening, Merrill," replied Potts, when the laughter had subsided. "Supposing, as you suggest, that we shall be the jilted and not the jilters, it will be certainly for our interest that the ladies should spare our feelings by disenchanting us,—saying, as it were, the charm backward that first charmed us. He who would teach the ladies the method and enlist their tender hearts in its behalf would be, perhaps, the greatest benefactor his much-jilted and heart-sore sex ever had. Then, indeed, with the heart-breakers of both sexes pledged to so humane a practice, there would be no more any such thing as sorrow over unrequited affections, and the poets and novelists would beg their bread."

"That is a millennial dream, Potts," responded Merrill. "You may possibly persuade the men to make themselves disagreeable for pity's sake, but it is quite too much to expect that a woman would deliberately put herself in an unbecoming light, if it were to save a world from its sins."

"Perhaps it is," said Potts pensively; "but considering what perfectly inexhaustible resources of disagreeableness there are in the best of us and the fairest of women, it seems a most gratuitous cruelty that any heart should suffer when a very slight revelation would heal its hurt. We can't help people suffering because we are so faulty and imperfect, but we might at least see that nobody ever had a pang from thinking us better than we are."

"Look at Hunt!" said Sturgis. "He does n't open his mouth, but drinks in Potts's wisdom as eagerly as if he did n't know it was a pump that never stops."

There was a general laugh among those who glanced up in time to catch the expression of close attention on Hunt's face.

"Probably he 's deliberating on the application of the Potts patent painless cure to some recent victim of that yellow mustache and goatee," suggested Merrill, with the envy of a smooth-faced youth for one more favored.

Hunt, whose face had sprung back like a steel-trap to its usual indifferent expression, smiled nonchalantly at Merrill's remark. One whose reticent habit makes his secrets so absolutely secure as Hunt's private affairs always were is stirred to amusement rather than trepidation by random guesses which come near the truth.

"If I were situated as Merrill flatteringly suggests, I should enjoy nothing better than such an experiment," he replied deliberately. "It would be quite a novel sensation to revolutionize one's ordinary rule of conduct so as to make a point of seeming bad or stupid. There would be as much psychology in it as in an extra term, at least. A man would find out, for instance, how much there was in him besides personal vanity and love of approbation. It would be a devilish small residue with most of us, I fancy."

The talk took a new turn, and the fun grew fast and furious around Hunt, who sat puffing his pipe, absorbed in contemplation. At about half-past nine, when things were getting hilarious, he beat a retreat, followed by the reproaches of the fellows. He was determined to administer the first dose of Potts's painless cure to his interesting patient that very evening, if she had not already retired. He was in high good humor. Potts was a brick; Potts was a genius. How lucky that he had happened to go up to college that night! He felt as if an incubus were lifted off his mind. No more pangs of conscience and uncomfortable sense of being a mean and cruel fellow, for him. Annie should be glad to be rid of him before he had ended with her. She should experience a heartfelt relief, instead of a broken heart, on his departure. He could n't help chuckling. He had such confidence in his nerve and his reticent habit that his confidence and ability to carry out the scheme were undoubting, and at its first suggestion he had felt almost as much relief as if he had already executed it.

On arriving home, he found Annie sewing alone in the parlor, and a little offish in manner by way of indicating her sense of his offense in leaving her to spend the evening alone.

"Really, Annie," he said, as he sat down and unfolded the evening paper, "I try to give you all the time I can spare. If, instead of sulking, you had taken a piece of paper and calculated how many hours this week I have managed to give you my company, you would scarcely have felt like repining because you could n't see me for an hour or two this evening."

That was the first gun of the campaign. She looked up in blank surprise, too much astonished, for the moment, to be indignant at such a vulgarly conceited remark from him. Without giving her time to speak, he proposed to read the newspaper aloud, and at once began, making a point of selecting the dullest editorials and the flattest items and witticisms, enlivening them with occasional comments of studied insipidity, and one or two stories, of which he carefully left out the "nubs." He was apparently making an unusual effort all the while to be entertaining, and Annie, finding no opening for expressing her vexation, finally excused herself

and went upstairs, with no very angelic expression of countenance.

"Pretty well for a beginning," was Hunt's muttered comment as he laid down the paper.

At breakfast Mr. Gifford asked him:—

"Shall I give you some tongue?"

Looking around with the air of one saying a good thing, he replied:—

"Thank you, I have enough of my own."

The silence was painful. Mr. Gifford looked as if he had lost a near friend. Mrs. Gifford at length, remembering that Hunt was a guest, forced a momentary, ghastly smile. Annie was looking melancholy enough before, but a slight compression of the lips indicated that she had received the full effect. Certain degrees of badness in jokes stamp the joker as a natural inferior in the eyes of even the most rabid of social levelers. Scarcely any possible exhibition of depravity gives quite the sickening sense of disappointment in the perpetrator imparted by a genuinely bad or stale joke. Two or more similar sensations coming near together are multiplied by mutual reverberations so as to be much more impressive than if they occurred at considerable intervals. Hunt's tongue joke not only retroacted to deepen the impression of vulgarity which his last evening's performance had given Annie, but in turn was made to appear a far more significant indication of his character on account of its sequence to that display.

That evening he made her a little present, having selected as a gift a book of the day of which he had chanced to overhear her express to a third person a particularly cordial detestation. It was decidedly the best book of the year, he said; he had read it himself. She was obliged to thank him for it, and even to tell one or two polite fibs, which wrenched her terribly, and the memory of which lent a special spite to the vehemence with which she threw the book into a corner on reaching her room. Then she went remorsefully and picked it up again, and after holding it awhile irresolutely, proceeded to hide it away in a far corner of one of the least used drawers of her bureau.

Not sleeping very well that night, she came downstairs next morning just as Hunt was leaving. He kissed his hand to her and called out "Aw revore." At first she was merely puzzled, and smiled, and then it occurred to her that it was doubtless the barbarous way he pronounced *au revoir*, and the smile gave place to an expression of slight nausea. As Hunt well knew, her pet aversion was people who lugged mispronounced French phrases into their conversation under the impression that they imparted a piquant and graceful effect. It was a touch of vulgarity which inspired her with a violent contempt absurdly disproportioned to the gravity of the offense. It had always been a cherished theory of hers that there were certain offenses in manners which were keys to character. If persons committed them, it implied an essential strain of vulgarity in their dispositions. Judged by this theory, where would her lover come out?

Hunt managed to get into a political discussion with Mr. Gifford at table that noon, talking in a rather supercilious tone, and purposely making several bad blunders, which Mr. Gifford corrected rather pointedly. Annie could not help observing that her lover's conceit and ignorance of the subjects discussed seemed about equal.

"How do you like your book?" he asked that evening.

She murmured something confusedly.

"Haven't begun it yet?" he inquired in surprise. "Well, when once you do, I 'm sure you 'll not lay it down till it's finished. And, by the way, your judgment in literary matters is so good, I 'd like to get your opinion on the essay I 'm getting up for Commencement. I think it's rather the best thing I 've written."

He proceeded to read what purported to be a sketch of its argument, which proved to be so flat and vapid that Annie blushed with shame for his mental poverty, and was fain to cover her chagrin with a few meaningless comments.

Her mind was the theatre of a struggle between disgust and affection, which may be called ghastly. Had he been openly wicked, she would have known how to give a good account of all disloyal suggestions to desert or forget him. But what could she do against such a cold, creeping thing as this disgust and revulsion of taste, which, like the chills of incipient fever, mingled with every rising pulse of tender feeling? Finally, out of her desperation, she concluded that the fault must be with her; that she was fickle, while he was true. She tried hard to despise herself, and determined to fight down her growing coldness, and reciprocate as it deserved the affection with which he was so lavish. The result of these mental exercises was to impart a humility and constrained cordiality to her air very opposite to its usual piquancy and impulsiveness, and, by a sense of her own shortcomings, to distract her mind from speculation, which she might otherwise have indulged, over the sudden development of so many unpleasant qualities in her lover. Though, indeed, had her speculations been never so active and ingenious, the actual plan on which Hunt was proceeding would probably have lain far beyond the horizon of her conjecture.

Meanwhile, Hunt was straitened for time; only eight or ten days of the term were left, and in that time he must effect Annie's cure, if at all. A slow cure would be much more likely to prove a sure one, but he must do the best he could in the time he had. And yet he did not dare to multiply startling strokes, for fear of bewildering instead of estranging her, and, possibly, of suggesting suspicion. Stimulated by the emergency, he now began to put in some very fine work, which, although it may not be very impressive in description, was probably more effective than any other part of his tactics. Under guise of appearing particularly attentive and devoted, he managed to offend Annie's taste and weary her patience in every way that ingenuity could suggest. His very manifestations of affection were so associated with some affectation or exhibition of bad taste, as always to leave an unpleasant impression on her mind. He took as much pains to avoid saying tolerably bright or sensible things in his conversation as people generally do to say them. In all respects he just reversed the rules of conduct suggested by the ordinary motive of a desire to ingratiate one's self with others.

And by virtue of a rather marked endowment of that delicate sympathy with others' tastes and feelings which underlies good manners, he was able to make himself far more unendurable to Annie than a less sympathetic person could have done. Evening after evening she went to her room feeling as if she were



covered with pin-pricks, from a score of little offenses to her fastidious taste which he had managed to commit. His thorough acquaintance with her, and knowledge of her aesthetic standards in every respect, enabled him to operate with a perfect precision that did not waste a stroke.

It must not be supposed that it was altogether without sharp twinges of compunction, and occasional impulses to throw off his disguise and enjoy the bliss of reconciliation, that he pursued this cold-blooded policy. He never could have carried it so far, had he not been prepared by a long and painful period of self-reproach on account of his entanglement. It was, however, chiefly at the outset that he had felt like weakening. As soon as she ceased to seem shocked or surprised at his disclosures of insipidity or conceit, it became comparatively easy work to make them. So true is it that it is the fear of the first shocked surprise of others, rather than of their deliberate reprobation, which often deters us from exhibitions of unworthiness.

In connection with this mental and moral masquerade, he adopted several changes in his dress, buying some clothes of very glaring patterns, and blossoming out in particularly gaudy neckties and flashy jewelry. Lest Annie should be puzzled to account for such a sudden access of depravity, he explained that his mother had been in the habit of selecting some of his lighter toilet articles for him, but this term he was trying for himself. Didn't she think his taste was good? He also slightly changed the cut of his hair and whiskers, to affect a foppish air, his theory being that all these external alterations would help out the effect of being a quite different person from the George Hunt with whom she had fallen in love.

Lou Roberts was Annie's confidante, older than she, much more dignified, and of the reticent sort to which the mercurial and loquacious naturally tend to reveal their secrets. She knew all that Annie knew, dreamed, or hoped about Hunt; but had never happened to meet him, much to the annoyance of Annie, who had longed inexpressibly for the time when Lou should have seen him, and she herself be able to enjoy the luxury of hearing his praises from her lips. One evening it chanced that Lou called with a gentleman while Hunt had gone out to rest himself, after some pretty arduous masquerading, by a little unconstrained intercourse with the fellows up at college. As he returned home, at about half-past nine, he heard voices through the open windows, and guessed who the callers were.

As he entered the room, despite the disenchanting experiences of the past week, it was with a certain pretty agitation that Annie rose to introduce him, and she looked blank enough when, without waiting for her offices, he bowed with a foppish air to Lou and murmured a salutation.

"What, are you acquainted already?" exclaimed Annie.

"I certainly did not know that we were," said Lou coldly, not thinking it possible that this flashily dressed youth, with such an enormous watch-chain and insufferable manners, could be Annie's hero.

"Ah, very likely not," he replied carelessly, adding with an explanatory smile that took in all the group: "Ladies' faces are so much alike that, 'pon my soul, unless there is something distinguished about them, I don't know whether I know them or not. I depend on them to tell me; fortunately they never forget gentlemen."

Miss Roberts's face elongated into a freezing stare. Annie stood there in a sort of stupor till Hunt said briskly:—

"Well, Annie, are you going to introduce this lady to me?"

As she almost inaudibly pronounced their names, he effusively extended his hand, which was not taken, and exclaimed:—

"Lou Roberts! is it possible? Excuse me if I call you Lou. Annie talks of you so much that I feel quite familiar."

"Do you know, Miss Roberts," he continued, seating himself close beside her, "I 'm quite prepared to like you?"

"Indeed!" was all that young lady could manage to articulate.

"Yes," continued he, with the manner of one giving a flattering reassurance, "Annie has told me so much in your favor that, if half is true, we shall get on together excellently. Such girl friendships as yours and hers are so charming."

Miss Roberts glanced at Annie, and seeing that her face glowed with embarrassment, smothered her indignation, and replied with a colorless "Yes."

"The only drawback," continued Hunt, who manifestly thought he was making himself very agreeable, "is that such bosom friends always tell each other all their affairs, which of course involve the affairs of all their friends also. Now I suppose," he added, with a knowing grin and something like a wink, "that what you don't know about me is n't worth knowing."

"You ought to know, certainly," said Miss Roberts.

"Not that I blame you," he went on, ignoring her sarcasm. "There's no confidence betrayed, for when I 'm talking with a lady, I always adapt my remarks to the ears of her next friend. It prevents misunderstandings."

Miss Roberts made no reply, and the silence attracted notice to the pitiable little dribble of forced talk with which Annie was trying to keep the other gentleman's attention from the exhibition Hunt was making of himself. The latter, after a pause long enough to intimate that he thought it was Miss Roberts's turn to say something, again took up the conversation, as if bound to be entertaining at any cost.

"Annie and I were passing your house the other day. What a queer little box it is! I should think you 'd be annoyed by the howlings of that church next door. The —— are so noisy."

"I am a —— myself," said Miss Roberts, regarding him crushingly.

Hunt, of course, knew that, and had advisedly selected her denomination for his strictures. But he replied as if a little confused by his blunder:—

"I beg your pardon. You don't look like one."

"How do they usually look?" she asked sharply.

"Why, it is generally understood that they are rather vulgar, I believe, but you, I am sure, look like a person

of culture." He said this as if he thought he were conveying a rather neat compliment. Indignant as she was, Miss Roberts's strongest feeling was compassion for Annie, and she bit her lips and made no reply.

After a moment's silence, Hunt asked her how she liked his goatee. It was a new way of cutting his whiskers, and young ladies were generally close observers and therefore good judges of such matters. Annie, finding it impossible to keep up even the pretense of talking any longer, sat helplessly staring at the floor, and waiting in nerveless despair for what he would say next, fairly hating Lou because she did not go.

"What's come over you, Annie?" asked Hunt briskly. "Are you talked out so soon? I suppose she is holding back to give you a chance to make my acquaintance, Miss Roberts, or do let me call you Lou. You must improve your opportunity, for she will want to know your opinion of me. May I hope it will prove not wholly unfavorable?" This last was with a killing smile.

"I had no idea it was so late. We must be going," said Miss Roberts, rising. She had been lingering, in the hope that something would happen to leave a more pleasant impression of Hunt's appearance, but seeing that matters were drifting from bad to worse, she hastened to break off the painful scene. Annie rose silently without saying a word, and avoided Lou's eyes as she kissed her good-by.

"Must you go?" Hunt said. "I 'm sure you would not be in such haste if you knew how rarely it is that my engagements leave me free to devote an evening to the ladies. You might call on Annie a dozen times and not meet me."

As soon as the callers had gone, Hunt picked up the evening paper and sat down to glance it over, remarking lightly as he did so:—

"Rather nice girl, your friend, though she does n't seem very talkative."

Annie made no reply, and he looked up.

"What on earth are you staring at me in such an extraordinary manner for?"

Was he then absolutely unconscious of the figure he had made of himself?

"You are not vexed because I went out and left you in the early part of the evening?" he said anxiously.

"Oh, no, indeed," she wearily replied.

She sat there with trembling lip and a red spot in each cheek, looking at him as he read the paper unconcernedly, till she could bear it no longer, and then silently rose and glided out of the room. Hunt heard her running upstairs as fast as she could, and closing and locking her chamber door.

Next day he did not see her till evening, when she was exceedingly cold and distant, and evidently very much depressed. After bombarding her with grieved and reproachful glances for some time, he came over to her side, they two having been left alone, and said, with affectionate raillery:—

"I 'd no idea you were so susceptible to the green-eyed monster."

She looked at him, astonished quite out of her reserve.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Oh, you need n't pretend to misunderstand," he replied, with a knowing nod. "Don't you suppose I saw how vexed you were last night when your dear friend Miss Roberts was trying to flirt with me? But you need n't have minded so much. She is n't my style at all."

There was something so perfectly maddening in this cool assumption that her bitter chagrin on his account was a fond jealousy, that she fairly choked with exasperation, and shook herself away from his caress as if a snake had stung her. Her thin nostrils vibrated, her red lips trembled with scorn, and her black eyes flashed ominously. He had only seen them lighten with love before, and it was a very odd sensation to see them for the first time blazing with anger, and that against himself. Affecting an offended tone, he said:—

"This is really too absurd, Annie," and left the room as if in a pet, just in time to escape the outburst he knew was coming. She sat in the parlor with firm-set lips till quite a late hour that evening, hoping that he would come down and give her a chance to set him right with an indignant explanation. So humiliating to her did his misunderstanding seem, that it was intolerable he should retain it a moment longer, and she felt almost desperate enough to go and knock at his door and correct it. Far too clever a strategist to risk an encounter that evening, he sat in his room comfortably smoking and attending to arrears of correspondence, aware that he was supposed by her to be sulking desperately all the while. He knew that her feeling was anger and not grief, and while, had it been the latter, he would have been thoroughly uncomfortable from sympathy, he only chuckled as he figured to himself her indignation. At that very moment, she was undoubtedly clenching her pretty little fists, and breathing fast with impotent wrath, in the room below. Ah, well, let her heart lie in a pickle of good strong disgust overnight, and it would strike in a good deal more effectually than if she were allowed to clear her mind by an indignant explanation on the spot.

The following day he bore himself toward her with the slightly distant air of one who considers himself aggrieved, and attempted no approaches. In the evening, which was her first opportunity, she came to him and said in a tone in which, by this time, weariness and disgust had taken the place of indignation:—

"You were absurdly mistaken in thinking that Miss Roberts was trying to flirt."

"Bless your dear, jealous heart!" interrupted Hunt laughingly, with an air of patronizing affection. "I'd no idea you minded it so much. There, there! Let's not allude to this matter again. No, no! not another word!" he gayly insisted, putting his hand over her mouth as she was about to make another effort to be heard.

He was determined not to hear anything, and she had to leave it so. It was with surprise that she observed how indifferently she finally acquiesced in being so cruelly misunderstood by him. In the deadened state of her feelings, she was not then able to appreciate the entire change in the nature of her sentiments which that indifference showed. Love, though rooted in the past, depends upon the surrounding atmosphere for the breath of continued life, and he had surrounded her with the stifling vapors of disgust until her love had succumbed and withered. She found that his exhibitions of conceit and insipidity did not affect her in the same way as before. Her sensations were no longer sharp and poignant, but chiefly a dull shame and sense of disgrace that she had loved him. She met his attentions with a coldly passive manner, which gave him the liveliest satisfaction. The cure was succeeding past all expectation; but he had about time for one more

stroke, which would make a sure thing of it. He prepared the way by dropping hints that he had been writing some verses of late; and finally, with the evident idea that she would be flattered, gave out that his favorite theme was her own charms, and that she might, perhaps, before long receive some tributes from his muse. Her protests he laughed away as the affectations of modesty.

Now Hunt had never actually written a line of verse in his life, and had no intention of beginning. He was simply preparing a grand move. From the poet's corner of rural newspapers, and from comic collections, he clipped several specimens of the crudest sort of sentimental trash in rhyme. These he took to the local newspaper, and arranged for their insertion at double advertising rates. A few days later, he bustled into the parlor, smirking in his most odious manner, and, coming up to Annie, thrust an open newspaper before her, marked in one corner to call attention to several stanzas

*"Written for the 'Express.' To A-E G—D."*

With sinking of heart she took the paper, after ineffectually trying to refuse it, and Hunt sat down before her with a supremely complacent expression, to await her verdict. With a faint hope that the verses might prove tolerable, she glanced down the lines. It is enough to say that they were the very worst which Hunt, after great industry, had been able to find; and there he was waiting, just the other side the paper, in a glow of expectant vanity, to receive her acknowledgments.

"Well, what do you think of it? You need n't try to hide your blushes. You deserve every word of it, you know, Miss Modesty," he said gayly.

"It's very nice," replied Annie, making a desperate effort.

"I thought you 'd like it," he said, with self-satisfied assurance. "It's queer that a fellow can't lay on the praise too thick to please a woman. By the way, I sent around a copy to Miss Roberts, signed with my initials. I thought you 'd like to have her see it."

This last remark he called out after her as she was leaving the room, and he was not mistaken in fancying that it would complete her demoralization. During the next week or two he several times brought her copies of the local paper containing equally execrable effusions, till finally she mustered courage to tell him that she would rather he would not publish any more verses about her. He seemed rather hurt at this, but respected her feelings, and after that she used to find, hid in her books and music, manuscript sonnets which he had laboriously copied out of his comic collections. It was considerable trouble, but on the whole he was inclined to think it paid, and it did, especially when he culminated by fitting music to several of the most mawkish effusions, and insisting on her playing and singing them to him. As the poor girl, who felt that out of common politeness she could not refuse, toiled wearily through this martyrdom, writhing with secret disgust at every line, Hunt, lolling in an easy-chair behind her, was generally indulging in a series of horrible grimaces and convulsions of silent laughter, which sometimes left tears in his eyes,—to convince Annie, when she turned around to him, that his sentiment was at least genuine if vulgar. Had she happened on one of these occasions to turn a moment before she did, the resulting tableau would have been worth seeing.

Hunt had determined to both crown and crucially test the triumph of Potts's cure in Annie's case by formally offering himself to her. He calculated of course that she was now certain to reject him, and that was a satisfaction which he thought he fairly owed her. She would feel better for it, he argued, and be more absolutely sure not to regard herself as in any sense jilted, and that would make his conscience clearer. Yes, she should certainly have his scalp to hang at her girdle, for he believed, as many do, that next to having a man's heart a woman enjoys having his scalp, while many prefer it. Six weeks ago he would have been horrified at the audacity of the idea. His utmost ambition then was to break a little the force of her disappointment at his departure. But the unexpected fortune that had attended his efforts had advanced his standard of success, until nothing would now satisfy him but to pop the question and be refused.

And still, as the day approached which he had set for the desperate venture, he began to get very nervous. He thought he had a sure thing if ever a fellow had, but women were so cursedly unaccountable. Supposing she should take it into her head to accept him! No logic could take account of a woman's whimsies. Then what a pretty fix he would have got himself into, just by a foolhardy freak! But there was a strain of Norse blood in Hunt, and in spite of occasional touches of ague, the risk of the scheme had in itself a certain fascination for him. And yet he could n't help wishing he had carried out a dozen desperate devices for disgusting her with him, which at the time had seemed to him too gross to be safe from suspicion.

The trouble was that since he loved her no more he had lost the insight which love only gives into the feelings of another. Then her every touch and look and word was eloquent to his senses as to the precise state of her feeling toward him, but now he was dull and insensitive to such direct intuition. He could not longer feel, but could only argue as to how she might be minded toward him, and this it was which caused him so much trepidation, in spite of so many reasons why he should be confident of the result. Argument as to another's feelings is such a wretched substitute for the intuition of sympathy.

Finally, on the evening before the day on which he was to offer himself, the last of his stay at the Giffords', he got into such a panic that, determined to clinch the assurance of his safety, he asked her to play a game of cards, and then managed that she should see him cheat two or three times. The recollection of the cold disgust on her face as he bade her good-evening was so reassuring that he went to bed and slept like a child, in the implicit confidence that four horses could n't drag that girl into an engagement with him the next day.

It was not till the latter part of the afternoon that he could catch her alone long enough to transact his little business with her. Anticipating, or at least apprehending his design, she took the greatest pains to avoid meeting him, or to have her mother with her when she did. She would have given almost anything to escape his offer. Of course she could reject it, but fastidious persons do not like to have unpleasant objects put on their plates, even if they have not necessarily to eat them. But her special reason was that the scene would freshly bring up and emphasize the whole wretched history of her former infatuation and its miserable ending,—an experience every thought of which was full of shame and strong desire for the cleansing of forgetfulness. He finally cornered her in the parlor alone. As she saw him approaching and realized that there was no escape, she turned and faced him with her small figure drawn to its full height, compressed lips, pale

face, and eyes that plainly said, "Now have it over with as soon as possible." One hand resting on the table was clenched over a book. The other, hanging by her side, tightly grasped a handkerchief.

"Do you know I 've been trying to get a chance to speak with you alone all day?" he said.

"Have you?" she replied in a perfectly inexpressive tone.

"Can't you guess what I wanted to say?"

"I 'm not good at conundrums."

"I see you will not help me," he went on, and then added quickly, "it's a short story; will you be my wife?"

As he said the words, he felt as the lion-tamer does when he puts his head in the lion's jaws. He expects to take it out again, but if the lion should take a notion—His suspense was, however, of the shortest possible duration, for instantly, like a reviving sprinkle on a fainting face, the words fell on his ear:—

"I thank you for the honor, but I 'm sure we are not suited."

Annie had conned her answer on many a sleepless pillow, and had it by heart. It came so glibly, although in such a constrained and agitated voice, that he instantly knew it must have been long cut and dried.

It was now only left for him to do a decent amount of urging, and then acquiesce with dignified melancholy and go off laughing in his sleeve. What is he thinking of to stand there gazing at her downcast face as if he were daft?

A strange thing had happened to him. The sweet familiarity of each detail in the *petite* figure before him was impressing his mind as never before, now that he had achieved his purpose of putting it beyond the possibility of his own possession. The little hands he had held so often in the old days, conning each curve and dimple, reckoning them more his hands than were his own, and far more dearly so; the wavy hair he had kissed so fondly and delighted to touch; the deep dark eyes under their long lashes, like forest lakes seen through environing thickets, eyes that he had found his home in through so long and happy a time,— why, they were his! Of course he had never meant to really forfeit them, to lose them, and let them go to anybody else. The idea was preposterous,—was laughable. It was indeed the first time it had occurred to him in that light. He had only thought of her as losing him; scarcely at all of himself as losing her. During the whole time he had been putting himself in her place so constantly that he had failed sufficiently to fully canvass the situation from his own point of view. Wholly absorbed in estranging her from him, he had done nothing to estrange himself from her.

It was rather with astonishment and even an appreciation of the absurd, than any serious apprehension, that he now suddenly saw how he had stultified himself, and come near doing himself a fatal injury. For knowing that her present estrangement was wholly his work, it did not occur to him but that he could undo it as easily as he had done it. A word would serve the purpose and make it all right again. Indeed, his revulsion of feeling so altered the aspect of everything that he quite forgot that any explanation at all was necessary, and, after gazing at her for a few moments while his eyes, wet with a tenderness new and deliciously sweet, roved fondly from her head to her little slipper, doating on each feature, he just put out his arms to take her with some old familiar phrase of love on his lips.

She sprang away, her eye flashing with anger.

He looked so much taken aback and discomfited that she paused in mere wonder, as she was about to rush from the room.

"Annie, what does this mean?" he stammered. "Oh, yes,—why,—my darling, don't you know,—did n't you guess,—it was all a joke,— a stupid joke? I 've just been pretending."

It was not a very lucid explanation, but she understood, though only to be plunged in greater amazement.

"But what for?" she murmured.

"I did n't know I loved you," he said slowly, as if recalling with difficulty, and from a great distance, his motives, "and I thought it was kind to cure you of your love for me by pretending to be a fool. I think I must have been crazy, don't you?" and he smiled in a dazed, deprecating way.

Her face from being very pale began to flush. First a red spot started out in either cheek; then they spread till they covered the cheeks; next her forehead took a roseate hue, and down her neck the tide of color rushed, and she stood there before him a glowing statue of outraged womanhood, while in the midst her eyes sparkled with scorn.

"You wanted to cure me," she said at last, in slow, concentrated tones, "and you have succeeded. You have insulted me as no woman was ever insulted before."

She paused as if to control herself; for her voice trembled with the last words. She shivered, and her bosom heaved once or twice convulsively. Her features quivered; scorching tears of shame rushed to her eyes, and she burst out hysterically:—

"For pity's sake never let me see you again!"

And then he found himself alone.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POTTS'S PAINLESS CURE \*\*\*

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